Killing the Business:

Affect, Work, and Kayfabe in Professional Wrestling

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Abstract

Killing the Business: Affect, Work, and Kayfabe in Professional Wrestling approaches pro wrestling as a "liminal genre" of cultural practice that strategically makes use of and conventionalizes media, work, and sociocultural discourses and practices between events. It investigates how pro wrestling's generic conventions mediate and pattern pro wrestling's structures of feeling, and the formalized ways in which the industry operates as an affective economy that generates lived material and social effects (Ahmed, 2014; Berlant, 2008; Chow, 2014).

Since the 1880s, pro wrestling has operated as a "practice of staging contradictions" (Levi, 2008, p. 5). The most fundamental of these contradictions is the tension between pro wrestling's theatrical illusion of being a competitive sport and the reality that matches are predetermined or fixed. Matches appear as violent confrontations, but they are, in fact, performed through cooperative, embodied, and emotional work that aims to avoid bodily harm and to bring the audience to an expressive, affective climax (Chow, 2014; R. T. Smith, 2014). Across English-speaking pro wrestling scenes, participants, including wrestlers, promoters, journalists, workers, and fans, refer to this illusion as "kayfabe" (Litherland, 2014; Schulze, 2014). Those who revealed kayfabe would be accused of "killing the business."

This dissertation turns to pro wrestling during a time, approximately between 2016 and 2023, in which its local and transnational industries have been in flux. For decades, World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) dominated the professional wrestling industry. However, beginning around 2016, the emergence of online media hosting platforms, social media, and online shopping saw the popularization of regional, independent wrestling, and transnational wrestling promotions (companies), such as New Japan Pro-Wrestling (NJPW) and All Elite Wrestling (Castleberry et al., 2018; Reinhard & Olson, 2019a). International and "indie stars," well-known wrestlers working outside of the major promotions, emerged. Likewise, independent wrestlers and promotions have engaged with social media and podcasts to build their personal brands, wrestling personas, and fanbases, which they have leveraged for income and bookings. A pro wrestling media industry that both resembles and contrasts the WWE has surged around it.

Killing the Business draws on feminist, queer, and pro wrestling scholarship and praxis to contribute new insights into the dynamics between affect, kayfabe, and work in pro wrestling. It brings cultural studies, media studies, and industry studies to a new examination of the professional wrestling industry. Through ethnographic research and close analyses of pro wrestling media, performance, and cultural objects, it maps an affective economy networked between local independent wrestling promotions, including those in Montréal and Winnipeg, social media from individual wrestlers and participants, and the transnational company All Elite Wrestling. This dissertation offers a unique and sustained inquiry into the "business" of American and Canadian pro wrestling—its media industry, cultural scenes, aesthetic conventions, and meaning-making processes. It examines how pro wrestling industry and performance conventions are being worked out and reimagined across indie and major promotions. Its chapters analyze the media texts surrounding an acclaim match, interview podcasts, material culture (i.e., gear, merchandise, photography), physical training, event booking, and backstage care. Across these analyses, it argues that pro wrestling is formed and

fueled by the contingencies between affect, work, and kayfabe, and it takes an intersectional feminist approach to investigate how participants engage with these contingencies to shape the uneven material, cultural, and social conditions of pro wrestling (Crenshaw, 1991). It investigates how "killing the business" describes not only a process of exposing the generic practices of pro wrestling, but engagement with and critiques of its conditions that seek to reconfigure what it means to be "killing it," or doing well, in pro wrestling.

Résumé

Killing the Business: Affect, Work, and Kayfabe in Professional Wrestling aborde la lutte professionnelle comme un « genre liminal » de pratique culturelle qui utilise et conventionnalise, de façon stratégique, les médias, le travail ainsi que les discours et pratiques socioculturels entre les événements. Cette thèse analyse la manière dont les conventions génériques de la lutte professionnelle modèrent et modèlent les structures de sentiment de la lutte professionnelle, ainsi que les manières formalisées dont l'industrie fonctionne comme une économie affective qui génère des effets matériels et sociaux vécus (Ahmed, 2014 ; Berlant, 2008 ; Chow, 2014).

Depuis les années 1880, la lutte professionnelle fonctionne comme une « pratique de mise en scène des contradictions » (Levi, 2008, p. 5). La plus fondamentale de ces contradictions est la tension entre l'illusion théâtrale de la lutte professionnelle, selon laquelle celle-ci serait un sport de compétition, et la réalité qui est que les matchs sont prédéterminés ou fixés. Les matchs apparaissent comme des confrontations violentes, mais ils sont en fait le fruit d'un travail coopératif, incarné et émotionnel qui vise à éviter les blessures corporelles et à amener le public à un point culminant expressif et affectif (Chow, 2014 ; R. T. Smith, 2014). Dans les scènes de lutte professionnelle anglophones, les participants, y compris les lutteurs, les promoteurs, les journalistes, les travailleurs et les fans, appellent cette illusion « kayfabe » (Litherland, 2014 ; Schulze, 2014). Ceux qui divulgueraient Kayfabe seraient accusés de « tuer le business ».

Cette thèse se tourne vers la lutte professionnelle à une époque, approximativement entre 2016 et 2023, où les secteurs locaux et transnationaux de cette industrie étaient en mutation. Pendant des décennies, la World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) a dominé l'industrie de la lutte professionnelle. Cependant, à partir de 2016, l'émergence des plateformes d'hébergement de médias en ligne, des médias sociaux et du magasinage en ligne a permis à la lutte régionale, la lutte indépendante et les compagnies de promotion transnationales, telles que New Japan Pro-Wrestling (NJPW) et All Elite. Lutte, de se populariser (Castleberry et al., 2018 ; Reinhard & Olson, 2019a). Des lutteurs internationaux et des « stars indépendantes », des lutteurs bien connus travaillant en dehors des grandes compagnies de promotion, ont émergé. De même, les lutteurs indépendants et les promotions se sont tournés vers les médias sociaux et les podcasts pour créer leurs marques personnelles, leurs personnages de lutte et leurs bases de fans, qu'ils utilisent pour générer des revenus et des réservations. Une industrie médiatique de lutte professionnelle qui à la fois ressemble et se distingue de la WWE s'est développée autour de celle-ci.

Killing the Business s'appuie sur les études et les pratiques de la lutte féministes, queer et professionnelles pour renouveler les perspectives sur la dynamique entre affect, kayfabe et travail dans la lutte professionnelle. La thèse utilise également les études culturelles, les études sur les médias et les études industrielles pour alimenter son analyse de l'industrie. Grâce à des recherches ethnographiques et à des analyses approfondies des médias, des performances et des objets culturels de la lutte professionnelle, elle cartographie une économie affective en réseau entre les promotions de lutte indépendantes locales, y compris celles de Montréal et de Winnipeg, les médias sociaux de lutteurs et de participants individuels, et la société transnationale All Elite. Lutte. Cette thèse propose une analyse unique et soutenue du « business » de la lutte professionnelle américaine et canadienne : son industrie médiatique, ses scènes

culturelles, ses conventions esthétiques et ses processus de création de sens. Elle examine comment l'industrie de la lutte professionnelle et les conventions de performance sont élaborées et réinventées à travers les promotions indépendantes et majeures. Les chapitres analysent les textes médiatiques entourant un match acclamé, les podcasts d'interviews, la culture matérielle (c'est-à-dire l'équipement, les marchandises, la photographie), l'entraînement physique, la réservation de billets et l'entretien des coulisses. À travers ces analyses, la thèse soutient que la lutte professionnelle est formée et alimentée par les contingences de l'affect, du travail et du kayfabe, et elle adopte une approche féministe intersectionnelle pour étudier comment les participants utilisent l'aspect contingent de la lutte pour en façonner les conditions inégales matérielles, culturelles et sociales (Crenshaw, 1991). Elle explore comment « tuer le business » décrit non seulement un processus d'exposition des pratiques génériques de la lutte professionnelle, mais aussi un engagement critique avec celles-ci qui cherche à repenser ce que signifie « tout déchirer » (en anglais, « killing it ») ou bien réussir dans le secteur professionnel de la lutte.

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Statement of Contributions

Contribution of Author

I am the sole author of this dissertation. I organized, wrote, and revised each chapter. I also incorporated feedback from my co-supervisors, Dr. Will Straw and Dr. Carrie Rentschler. Dr. Brian Jansen at the University of Maine offered copyediting feedback and comments, which I also incorporated.

Contributions to Original Knowledge

Killing the Business aims to insert new questions regarding genre, gender, sexuality, race, class, labour, affinity, and embodiment to analyses of the pro wrestling industry and culture. This dissertation also seeks to bring a largely overlooked industry to media studies and industry studies. By highlighting pro wrestling as a genre of betweenness, it aims to identify and analyze the intersections of seemingly separate industries, including live performance, television, podcasting, and merchandising to draw attention to broader cultural discourses and entertainment labour practices. This dissertation offers a unique set of examples for examining the entanglements between branding, bodily performance, care, and affective and digital labour. Overall, it aims to offer insights into how creative industries more broadly are reworking their commercial models across the relationships between performers, fans, merchandisers, and other media producers.

List of Abbreviations

AEW – All Elite Wrestling

BTE – *Being the Elite*

CEO – Chief Executive Officer

EVP – Executive Vice President

IWTV – Independent Wrestling Television

LGBTQ+ - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, and more

NBC – National Broadcasting Company

NJPW – New Japan Pro-Wrestling

NFL – National Football League

Pro – Professional

PPV – Pay-Per-View

PWG – Pro Wrestling Guerrilla

TBS – Turner Broadcasting System

TNT – Turner Network Television

TSN2 – The Sports Network 2

TV – Television

US – United States

WWII – World War II

WWE – World Wrestling Entertainment

WWF – World Wrestling Federation

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Preface

Being in a Pro Wrestling Moment

"Cody! Cody! Cody!"

The tall, bleach-blond wrestler soaks it in as he stands, muscles flexed, on the ropes of the wrestling ring. I'm chanting "Cody" along with my partner Zach and the few hundred fans that have crowded into an Ottawa banquet hall to see Cody Rhodes and a roster of independent and All Elite Wrestling wrestlers perform for the local independent company C*4 Wrestling. Less than three months earlier Zach and I had cheered with 11,000 fans at the MGM Grand Garden Arena in Las Vegas as Cody posed similarly for the in-house audience and the hundreds of thousands watching All Elite Wrestling's inaugural pay-per-view (PPV) Double or Nothing from home. Excitement and anticipation pour out of the Ottawa crowd just like they had in Las Vegas. Although the shows are of vastly different scale, each time I cheer with the crowd, I feel like I am in the middle of a wrestling moment.

Figure 1-2. Left to right: Cody Rhodes stands on the ropes at C*4 Wrestling in Ottawa on August 16, 2019. Cody Rhodes stands on the ropes at Double or Nothing in Las Vegas on May 25, 2019. Photos by the author.

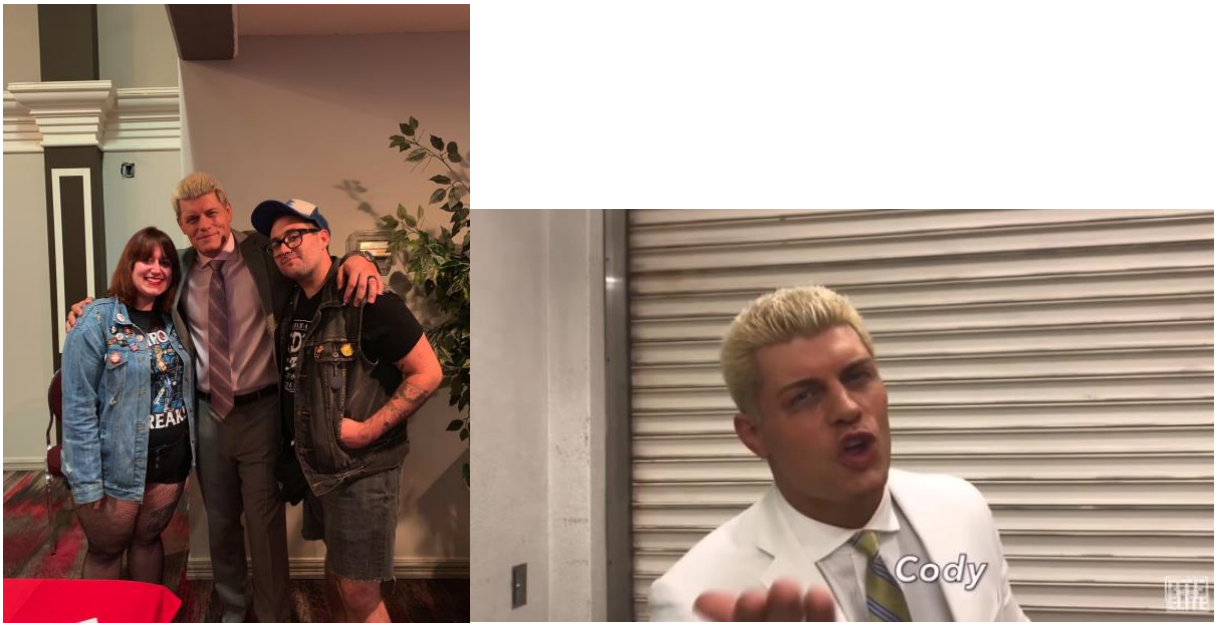
Cody[1] and wrestlers more broadly are in the business of making affectively charged moments. As their New Japan Pro-Wrestling contracts expired on midnight January 1st, 2019, Cody and his fellow "The Elite" wrestlers Adam Page and Matt and Nick Jackson, announced the start of their new wrestling promotion All Elite Wrestling (AEW) on their YouTube series *Being the Elite* (*BTE*). "Part travel vlog, reality show, and wrestling show," *BTE*, which was started by the Jacksons in 2016, "entangles fictional and behind-the-scenes footage" and stories, and became the perfect vehicle from which to launch their American wrestling promotion (Fontaine, 2022, p. 294). In the following days and weeks, the wrestlers—some of whom took on roles as company executive vice presidents—made appearances at local indie wrestling events across America to sign wrestlers to AEW contracts and announce upcoming events.[2] They featured many of these on *BTE* and social media.

Figure 3. Adam Page holds up his phone, which reveals the brand-new All Elite Wrestling logo. The hands of Cody and Matt and Nick Jackson hold phones that show the logo for Double or Nothing. Still from final moments of *Being the Elite* episode "New Years Elite" (Being The Elite, 2019).

[1] I refer to Cody Rhodes as "Cody" in this section, because during this time period he was referred to by only his first name. The stage name "Cody Rhodes" was trademarked by World Wrestling Entertainment, Rhodes' former employer, and he was unable to use it on the indies and during the initial months of AEW. We were all on a first name basis with Cody during this time.

[2] Cody Rhodes and Matt and Nick Jackson all became executive vice presidents (EVP) at the company. Adam Page, as far as I can tell, signed only as an on-screen performer. A fourth member of The Elite, Kenny Omega, signed as both an EVP and wrestler when his New Japan contract expired the following month.

Although Cody's appearance at C*4 wrestling does not end up on *Being the Elite*, his presentation in Ottawa is steeped in references to his media performances over the year and gives the sense that the event is part of the build-up to AEW's TV debut. During a pre-show meet and greet, he wears a suit just like he does while performing bits on *BTE*. When Cody makes his match entrance, he wears his "Thronebreaker" t-shirt, referencing his dramatic entrance at Double or Nothing, where he broke a "stone" throne with a sledgehammer, symbolizing his break from his former employer World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE). His black and acid green ring pants and white "The Elite" boots are the same gear he wore during AEW's June YouTube event Fyter Fest.



Figures 4-5. Photo of my partner Zach and I posing with Cody at a meet and greet before his C*4 Wrestling match. I'm wearing a "Thronebreaker" t-shirt purchased as a discounted "botched" t-shirt from Pro Wrestling Tees. Still of Cody in the opening credits of *Being the Elite* (Being The Elite, 2019).

Figure 6. Still of Cody standing on the ropes during his entrance at Fyter Fest (All Elite Wrestling, 2019).

When Shawn Spears, who attacked Cody at the end of his Fyter Fest match with a steel chair, appears in Ottawa—chair in hand—we are witnessing an AEW angle, a narrative direction the wrestlers are working, at our local indie event. We are in a narrative beat before their next televised in-ring meeting. It feels like we are on *BTE*. We chant "Thank you, Cody!" and "A-E-Dub" just like the fans chant on *BTE.* It feels like we are all making the new wrestling company. We are making it happen.

And, to some degree, we are. Before All Elite Wrestling even begins its weekly transnational television broadcasts that October—the industry broadcasting standard of major wrestling promotions—the wrestlers are already telling their in-and-out-of-ring stories, and performing their wrestler personas on podcasts and social media. Pro wrestling "dirt sheets" or news outlets are reporting on new signings and broadcast deals. Gear makers are sewing trunks and robes. Merchandise makers are designing, printing and selling t-shirts. Fans, myself included, are spending our time, money, and energy on attending events, meet and greets, merchandise, and social media promotion. It's all happening in between. Professional wrestling is all of these things.

Introduction

Working an Angle through Pro Wrestling

Professional wrestling is a genre of ongoing betweenness, transition, and passage. *Killing the Business: Affect, Work, and Kayfabe in Professional Wrestling* approaches pro wrestling as a "liminal genre" of cultural practice that strategically makes use of and conventionalizes media, work, and social and cultural discourses and practices between events. It investigates how pro wrestling's generic conventions mediate and pattern pro wrestling's structures of feeling, and the formalized ways in which the industry operates as an affective economy that generates lived material and social effects (Ahmed, 2014; Berlant, 2008; Chow, 2014). In so doing, it examines how dynamics of gender, race, sexuality, and class inform industry conventions and investments.

Since its early days in the 1880s, pro wrestling has operated as a "practice of staging contradictions" (Levi, 2008, p. 5). The most fundamental of these contradictions is the tension between pro wrestling's theatrical illusion of being a competitive sport and the reality that matches are predetermined or fixed. Matches appear as violent confrontations, but they are, in fact, performed through cooperative, embodied, and emotional work that aims to avoid bodily harm and to bring the audience to an expressive, affective climax (Chow, 2014; R. T. Smith, 2014). Across English-speaking pro wrestling scenes, participants, including wrestlers, promoters, journalists, workers, and fans, refer to this illusion as "kayfabe" (Litherland, 2014; Schulze, 2014).

"Keeping kayfabe" or producing and maintaining kayfabe is the central generic convention and organizing ethos of the pro wrestling industry (Pratt, 2019, p. 140). The word "kayfabe" is part of a larger, complex vernacular language—sometimes referred to as "carny"—that was employed originally by insiders to "protect the business" by maintaining a theatrical

divide between wrestlers and audiences or "marks," who unwittingly believed the illusion (Litherland, 2014; Wrenn, 2007). Like conmen, they "worked" the crowd's emotions and their wallets (Fontaine, 2022, p. 294). Wrestlers who "broke kayfabe" or revealed the con would be accused of "killing the business."

In his seminal essay, "The World of Wrestling," Roland Barthes (2005) taps into these conventions when he declares that there is no "problem of truth" in pro wrestling, because it is a "spectacle of excess," where the wrestler's body becomes an excessive sign that "generates an emotion without reserve," "from the very depth of [the crowd's] humours" (pp. 24–26). Pro wrestling's aim, as Barthes (2005) notes, is to unleash audiences into "euphoria" (p. 31). However, audiences' euphoric states and "affective expressions are not free-flowing," but respond to the ongoing narratives and social practices of pro wrestling (Fontaine, 2022, p. 296). Pro wrestling audiences today are, and perhaps have always been, "smart marks" or "smarks" who know that although the fix is in, the match's outcome is more indeterminate than it first appears (Chow et al., 2017; Laine, 2019a; Warden et al., 2018; Wrenn, 2007). As performance and pro wrestling scholars Claire Warden, Eero Laine, and Broderick Chow argue, wrestling audiences, in fact, work *with* wrestlers to keep kayfabe and to produce a match's affective climax (Chow et al., 2017; Warden et al., 2018). Today, kayfabe and pro wrestling vernacular language are used by participants across wrestling media and cultural scenes as a subcultural shorthand. Moreover, kayfabe is often invoked as a "code of conduct for workers" and participants, and in discourses about what matters in pro wrestling—labour, capacity, "affinities, connections, loyalties, and enmities" (Laine, 2019a, p. 34; Levi, 2008, p. 17).

Although every match is fixed and wrestlers aim to work safely, pro wrestling is precarious. Across wrestling promotions, pro wrestlers are typically employed as independent

contractors without union representation or healthcare benefits, and lack of healthcare access, medical bills and income loss can have critical embodied and socioeconomic material effects on wrestlers (Oglesby, 2020). Like boxers and hockey players, wrestlers take concussions, broken bones, injury, and pain as commonplace occupational hazards (Malcolm et al., 2023). Many wrestlers have turned to steroids and painkillers to enable them to wrestle through injury. As Jasmin Mujanovic (2011) notes, "Since 1985, well over a hundred professional wrestlers have died before the age of 65—many of these due to drug overdoses, suicide and heart failure (a symptom of prolonged drug use)." Without an off season, there is no industry-slated time to have reparative surgeries or heal. There is also no guarantee that when a wrestler returns from injury that they will be reinserted into their feud, or that the fans will still be invested in them. These "industry dynamics effectively create a paradox in which wrestlers must be self-interested and entrepreneurial, while also being recognized as trustworthy, safe workers" (Malcolm et al., 2023, p. 587). Evidence of this paradox can be seen in pro wrestling discourse across industry and cultural spaces.

Killing the Business turns to pro wrestling during a time, approximately between 2016 and 2023, in which its local and transnational industries have been in flux. Transforming pro wrestling from a largely live performance or locally broadcasted television production in the 1980s, the World Wrestling Federation (WWF), now known as World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), established pro wrestling as a televisual genre, and has since largely dominated and defined pro wrestling's labour practices, cultural and material production, and media and performance conventions (Jeffries, 2019a; Krenek, 2017; Laine, 2019a). However, the emergence of online media hosting platforms, social media, and online shopping has seen the resurgence and popularization of regional, independent wrestling, and transnational wrestling

promotions (companies), such as New Japan Pro-Wrestling (NJPW) and All Elite Wrestling (Castleberry et al., 2018; Reinhard & Olson, 2019a). International and "indie stars," well-known wrestlers working outside of the major promotions, have emerged. Likewise, independent wrestlers and promotions have engaged with social media and podcasts to build their personal brands, wrestling personas, and fanbases, which they leverage for income and bookings. As such, a pro wrestling media industry that both resembles and in contrast with the WWE's model has surged around it.

Moreover, these technological changes have been accompanied by shifts in media production practices in and outside of the WWE, and in public and scholarly discourse (Jeffries & Kannegiesser, 2019; Kroener, 2019). Discussions regarding wrestling's racist, sexist and anti-queer representations, exploitative labour practices, and issues of safety and health have taken shape alongside unionization drives on social media and other public platforms. Likewise, scholars, particularly in theatre and media studies, have begun to approach pro wrestling as a research site. Their analyses examine pro wrestling through lenses of convergent media, transmedia, performance, and popular culture, and explore the roles that fans, producers, social media, and technology play in creating and disseminating wrestling (Chow et al., 2017; Jeffries, 2019b; Sammond, 2005).

Killing the Business builds on these public discussions and scholarship, and draws on feminist, queer, and pro wrestling scholarship and praxis to contribute new insights into the dynamics between affect, kayfabe, and work in pro wrestling. It brings cultural studies, media studies, and industry studies to a new examination of the professional wrestling industry. Through ethnographic research and close analyses of pro wrestling media, performance, and cultural objects, it maps an affective economy networked between local independent wrestling

promotions, including those in Montréal and Winnipeg, social media from individual wrestlers and participants, and the transnational company All Elite Wrestling. This dissertation offers a unique and sustained inquiry into the "business" of American and Canadian pro wrestling—its media industry, cultural scenes, aesthetic conventions, and meaning-making processes. It examines how pro wrestling industry and performance conventions are being worked out and reimagined across indie and major promotions. It argues that pro wrestling is formed and fueled by the contingencies between affect, work, and kayfabe, and it takes an intersectional feminist approach to investigate how participants engage with these contingencies to shape the uneven material, cultural, and social conditions of pro wrestling (Crenshaw, 1991). It investigates how "killing the business" describes not only a process of exposing the generic practices of pro wrestling, but signals what it means to be "killing it," or doing well, in pro wrestling.

A History of the Professional Wrestling Industry and its Generic Conventions

Pro wrestling has long operated in the tensions between the local and (trans)national, between sport and theatrical performance, and between the live and mediatized event. It first took shape in the United States and Canada as a live sporting or performance genre in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Referred to as "catch as catch can" or "catch," early pro wrestling merged different wrestling styles from both Indigenous communities in the United States and Canada and these nations' new immigrant populations to develop a freestyle that climaxed with knockouts, pin-falls (pinning one's opponent to the mat for a count of three), submissions, and time limits (Beekman, 2006; Hatton, 2016). Matches took place in local bars, theatres, and fairgrounds. Media, including newspapers, flyers, and, later, radio broadcasts, circulated match challenges and results to further regions (Beekman, 2006; Hatton, 2016). Initially, pro wrestling was a "pure" sport. However, newspapers from as early as the 1890s

suggest that pro wrestling's "fakery" might have taken shape quickly. These early accounts reported that outcomes were fixed and wrestlers "carried" "lesser opponents to generate excitement," increase bets, and draw audiences (Beekman, 2006, p. 26; Hatton, 2016, p. 49). Despite popular narratives suggesting that kayfabe "broke" or was revealed in the 1980s, when WWF CEO Vince McMahon declared that he was in the "sports entertainment" business to avoid taxes and regulation, the antagonistic practices of exposing and protecting the business appear to have a history as long as pro wrestling itself (Beekman, 2006).

By the 1920s, fixing matches was a widespread practice and an industry "territory system" was established to organize who controlled the fix. Promoters or company owners agreed to operate out of different geographical regions and refrain from booking shows in each other's markets. The system allowed promoters to maximize profits within a territory and placed the balance of power in the hands of promoters, not wrestlers. Wrestlers would work a territory for the length of their contract. If their contract was not renewed, they would move on to another in hopes of gaining work and popularity in the next territory. Yet, double-crosses occurred both at the level of promoters and wrestlers. Promoters breached each other's territories to book shows despite the agreement, and champion wrestlers "went into business for themselves" when, having "won" the belt, they took the physical championship to another company or territory for more money (Beekman, 2006). As a result, companies tended to book "shooters" as their champions. A shooter was a wrestler with legitimate fighting experience, who was loyal to the company, and could competitively win against his opponent, if he refused to stick to the script (Chow, 2014). Champions needed to be able to win, should the theatrical spectacle break down into a real fight. Therefore, champions tended to have large, athletic, and visually impressive physiques *and* knowledge of technical moves (Beekman, 2006). The maintenance of the kayfabe

illusion both informed and seemingly demanded particular hiring and labour practices.

The American-Canadian pro wrestling industry and culture has largely been shaped by white heterosexual cismen, who have maintained positions of power as promoters (who book the matches and choose the winners), performers, and a majority of audience members. Television writer and filmmaker Sonya Ballantyne calls this wrestling's "very racist, sexist bedrock" (S. Ballantyne, personal communication, February 8, 2021). Champions and high-profile wrestlers have largely been white heterosexual cismen who conformed to the public imaginary of the humble, "salt of the earth" All-American or Canadian hero (Jenkins III, 2005). Conversely, wrestling has a long practice of booking "foreign heels"—racialized villains who represented the nations' perceived contemporary enemies. Women's matches, which surged in the 1930s, largely took place without the awarding of championship status. The matches were positioned as comedic and sexually titillating for male audiences and, therefore, inappropriate for the seriousness of a championship title. The sexualized quality of these wrestling matches led to many states banning women's wrestling for decades (Beekman, 2006). In short, kayfabe, and what passes as believable or feels real in wrestling performances, have been shaped deeply by white masculine experience and culture.

The generic conventions of pro wrestling were further shaped through its mediatization on television. In the late 1940s, pro wrestling became a staple of early television and experienced its first television boom as wrestling was broadcasted nationally in the United States (Beekman, 2006; Dell, 2006). Weekly televization brought aesethetic changes to performances and what was expected from wrestlers. Although it was initially chosen for television alongside boxing as a sport that was easy to film, wrestling soon began to take on more theatrical qualities. Ringside commentators and live interviews were introduced and led to further blurring of the lines

between spectacle and labour. Wrestlers with "gimmicks," costumes, or distinct personas saw greater exposure, air-time, and received more championship matches than shooters. With the introduction of televised matches, female spectators began to outnumber men at pro wrestling events, and in-arena female fans from across classes and age groups—though largely white—acquired reputations for being rowdy, engaged, and sometimes violent fans (Dell, 2006). The mediatization of pro wrestling on television shifted the industry's performances of kayfabe, modes of experience, hiring practices, and audience affiliations.

Such shifts would continue as the programs moved to Saturday mornings and networks targeted another demographic: children, particularly young boys. Many wrestler personas began to resemble comic book heroes and villains. Female audiences dissipated, but did not disappear all together (Beekman, 2006; Dell, 2006). For decades, its popularity ebbed and wrestling retreated from national broadcasts to regionally syndicated programs, reflecting the territory system. A second television explosion came in the 1980s when Vince McMahon took charge of his father's company and began to "raid the territories"—buying up territorial stars for the WWF and broadcasting his programs on networks across America. McMahon's engagement with television broadcasting technology, particularly pay-per-view (PPV) programming, led to the development of long narrative arcs across multiple program episodes that climaxed at PPV events. Audiences needed to buy the PPV to see if their favourite wrestler would finally win against his opponent. Thus, McMahon established the major PPV event, particularly WrestleMania, and ongoing stories and narrative climaxes as staples of pro wrestling media. As McMahon's programs gained popularity, WWF's pro wrestling forms and infrastructures became the industry standard. WWF live events, which had been broadcasted from theatres on the east coast, began to tour and broadcast from arenas and stadiums across North America.

Without top talent, television exposure, or the ability to offer competitive contracts, local and regional wrestling floundered. The territories dissolved, and the WWF largely took control of pro wrestling aesthetics and conventions.

As the WWF's event locations and crowds grew in size, so did pro wrestling's spectacle and excess. WWF introduced audiences to vibrant, over-the-top characters, most famously Hulk Hogan. Excessively emotional "promos" or challenges to competitors that were spoken into the camera, catchphrases (i.e., "Macho Man" Randy Savage's "Oh Yeah!" and Ric Flair's "Wooo!"), and oversized prop weapons (i.e., Brutus "The Barber" Beefcake's garden schears Jake "The Snake" Roberts' live python) became generic conventions. Pro wrestling was, according to Henry Jenkins (2005), "a masculine melodrama" (p. 35). Again, women's matches, if they occurred, were treated as bathroom breaks or sexualized spectacles (Mazer, 1998), and many wrestlers' personas or gimmicks were racist, homophobic, or sexist stereotypes. Pro wrestling's practices of kayfabe, generic conventions, and industry structures shifted, but its representations and labour conditions remained uneven and exploitative.

Since the 1980s, WWE, like other sports and media coorporations, such as the National Basketball Association or Disney, has expanded its cultural reach through world-building branding.[3] Today, WWE media, business documents, and press releases all refer to "anything that is connected to WWE performances, including both fans and physical spaces" as the "WWE Universe" (Laine, 2019b, p. 28). The term "reflects WWE's efforts at total media and geographical domination" (Jeffries, 2019a, p. 14). WWE brands merchandise, including clothes, toys, bedsheets, and video games. It has a corporate social media presence across platforms and requires "superstars"—it rarely refers to its performers as wrestlers—to publish on Twitter and

[3] In 2002, WWF lost the rights to the WWF acronym in a lawsuit with the World Wildlife Fund and officially re-branded itself as World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) (Beekman, 2006).

Instagram.[4] WWE airs programming on major cable networks, PPVs, NBC's Peacock subscription platform, and on SportsNet Now in Canada. By granting exclusive programming rights to cable networks, WWE has, like the National Football League, ensured its economic and cultural value, and ability to attract viewers and advertisers in the cable and digital eras (Hutchins, 2012, p. 9). For decades, WWE positioned itself as the only wrestling company to watch, and the only place for American or Canadian wrestlers to make a living. Seemingly, there is/was nothing outside of its universe.

However, WWE does not actually exist in a vacuum, and it never has. Mexico (beginning in the 1930s) and Japan (post-WWII) developed their own major promotions (e.g., Consejo Mundial de Lucha Libre and New Japan Pro-Wrestling respectively), techniques, styles, conventions, media, and cultures (Chow et al., 2017; Levi, 2008), and have offered sites for pro wrestlers to train and work. While WWE has played an enormous role in shaping professional wrestling conventions, Mexican and Japanese wrestling and local indie promotions around the world also deteremine how professional wrestling operates in and out of the ring. In 2018, riding the popularity of *Being the Elite*, high merchandise sales, and crowd investment at their New Japan and indie dates, Cody Rhodes and Matt and Nick Jackson set out to produce All In, a one-off wrestling event that sold 10,000 tickets in Chicago, making it the largest indie event in the US (Reinhard, 2021). The event gained the wrestlers even more attention and would become the precursor to All Elite Wrestling. Since its emergence in 2019, AEW, which is backed by billionaire Tony Khan, whose family owns the NFL's Jacksonville Jaguars, has built working relationships with Asistencia, Asesoría y Administración de Espectáculos and New Japan, and

[4] In July 2023 new CEO Elon Musk rebranded Twitter as X. This dissertation will continue to refer to it as Twitter.

positioned itself as the WWE alternative, sometimes airing head-to-head with them on TBS/TNT in the United States and TSN2 in Canada (V. Smith, 2021).

On the local level in Canada and the United States, independent promotions and wrestling schools have persisted and developed into cultural scenes that are networked through the touring journeyman work of wrestlers, participant media making and sharing, and the affordances of media platform technologies. In the last two decades, digital technologies, particularly dedicated video platforms and YouTube, have eased the circulation (and raised the reputations) of media tied to international and local independent promotions, such as California's Pro Wrestling Guerrilla and Pittsburgh's Enjoy Wrestling.

Conceptual Framework

The capacious nature of pro wrestling requires that anyone writing about the subject be able to follow these developments. *Killing the Business* does so by "working an angle" or tracing a narrative through the proliferation of media, larger-than-life figures, myths, and all sorts of material stuff. It draws on scholarship from feminist, queer, and media studies, and pro wrestling studies and praxis to take an intersectional feminist approach. It investigates how participants experience the affective and social tensions between affect, work, and kayfabe in pro wrestling culture. It argues that participants work with these tensions to shape pro wrestling's media industry and culture.

Low Theory

My theoretical framework builds from Warden et al.'s (2018) invocation to think with the "the theoretical tools that emerge from the [pro wrestling] form itself" (p. 205). Engaging with Jack Halberstam's (2011) articulation of "low theory," Warden et al (2018) argue that "one of the lowest of low-brow narrative performance forms," pro wrestling, "performs a form of

critique and theory that offers important insights through its practice and performance" (p. 206). Pro wrestling's low theory emerges from the tensions between the embodied labour required to create the performance and the spectacle of the theatrical illusion itself—from the contingencies in the fix. In my approach, I turn to pro wrestling vernacular language, practices, and performances as theoretical tools to critique and explore the social and material conditions of the pro wrestling industry and culture. My next chapter will present this frame in more detail. I aim to "push through the divisions between life and art, practice and theory, thinking and doing, and into a more chaotic realm of knowing and unknowing" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 2). This project works with pro wrestling's low theory through two key frameworks: (1) the notion of pro wrestling vernacular language as a theoretical vocabulary and (2) an understanding of pro wrestling as a liminal genre.

(1) Pro Wrestling Vernacular Language

Pro wrestling "offers a whole vocabulary for parsing reality and fakery, theatricality and performance" and for attending to practices of labour and emotion (Laine, 2020, p. 194). I therefore take pro wrestling's vernacular language as full of analytical concepts for understanding and analyzing pro wrestling culture and practices (Ford, 2019; Moon, 2022). Language, itself, is "a collective practice of sense-making" (Woo, 2018, p. 3). Participants, as my ethnographic research confirmed, engage pro wrestling terms and concepts when discussing wrestling culture, and a large percentage use pro wrestling slang to talk about things other than wrestling (i.e., sports, politics, television, life events).[5] As sports studies scholars have noted,

[5] My online survey found that 84.8% of respondents used wrestling slang to talk about things other than wrestling. Similarly, interviewees indicated that they used the slang most often while talking about wrestling, but when asked if they used it in other day-to-day conversations, realized that they sometimes found a wrestling phrase coming to mind, but knew that their meaning might not be understood by those unfamiliar with pro wrestling. Participants also noted picking up the terms in different ways. Some learned the slang from family or friends. Others picked it up from pro wrestling books, magazines, online message boards, or social media.

sporting metaphors infuse the language of everyday speech. We speak of "overcoming hurdles" and "keeping your eye on the ball" (Hutchins, 2012, p. 8; Serazio, 2019, p. 25). Michael Serazio (2019) suggests that the use of 1700 sports metaphors in English frame "life itself as kind of 'game'" and structure social and cultural values (p. 25). As such, I identify participant definitions of pro wrestling terms, including those from my interviews, as shaping my theoretical approach. My dissertation examines how particular words are "put to work or called upon to do certain kinds of work" by pro wrestling participants (Ahmed, 2019, p. 3), and employs pro wrestling terms, such as "worker" (Chapters One, Two, and Three) "shoot" (Chapter Two), "gimmick" (Chapter Three), and "bumping" (Chapter Four), to organize its inquiry.

(2) Liminal Genre

My analysis thinks and feels with the ways that the pro wrestling industry operates as an affective economy that is conditioned by its boundary-crossing generic conventions. Pro wrestling's liminality takes shape through the following modes. First, pro wrestling employs the conventions of various performance and media genres, such as sport, theatre, and soap opera and its "capacity to signify comes from the very fact that it occupies a space somewhere between sport, ritual, and theater and is thus capable of drawing its power from all those genres" (Levi, 2008, pp. 5–6; Reinhard & Olson, 2019b). Second, it draws on the tensions between the real and the fictional during performances (Chow et al., 2017; Pratt, 2019; Reinhard & Olson, 2019b). Third, it makes meaning through narrative sequences, productive pauses, and transmedia texts (Reinhard & Olson, 2019b). Finally, pro wrestling is experienced through affective excess and across bodily intensities.

In her ethnographic analysis of lucha libre as a "liminal genre," anthropologist Heather Levi (2008) approaches lucha libre as "a social phenomenon and as a signifying practice" (p.

xiii). Levi's work on Mexican lucha libre culture provides a model for *Killing the Business* by demonstrating the ways that the genre of lucha libre was mediated through Mexican television, and the ways that its performances move out of the wrestling ring to new spheres of "high art" and politics (p. xix). She explains that lucha libre's "meaning is constructed in the public performance… but it is also created and communicated in the daily lives of wrestlers, in the performance of the wrestling audience, in the circulation of wrestling performances in various forms of mass media, in the circulation of lucha libre imagery outside of the context of the ring, and the overall cultural and political context within which the performance takes place" (pp. xiii–xiv). Levi's work is soundly situated in the specificities of lucha libre in Mexico and demonstrates the need to attend to the specificities of how the liminal genre of pro wrestling operates in the American and Canadian context.

However, because wrestling stories are "always-already-ongoing" and "reality and fiction, authenticity and illusion… are always-already ambiguously entangled within an ethos of kayfabe" (Pratt, 2019, pp. 142, 149), this dissertation attunes to the ways that wrestling's liminal generic conventions spill from the ring into other spaces of wrestling work and culture. Here I bring Levi's work in conversation with Lauren Berlant's work on genre in *The Female Complaint* (2008) and *Cruel Optimism* (2011) to get at how the genre of pro wrestling might mediate "structures of feeling" (R. Williams, 2015) and shape an "intimate public" in American and Canadian contexts. In doing so, I further shift the analytical thrust of genre from thinking with literary or performance types and taxonomies, towards thinking through the affective, relational, and recognition work of social form and industry conventions.

Lauren Berlant (2008) offers genre as a research tool for attending to "sensual registers" (7). They tell us that a genre is "an aesthetic structure of affective expectation, an institution or

formation that absorbs all kinds of small variations or modifications while promising that the persons transacting with it will experience the pleasure of encountering what they expected, with details varying the theme" (p. 4). As such, a genre's conventions provide "certain kinds of affective intensities and assurances" and its porousness allows for "complex audience identifications" and the development of "feelings of belonging" (p. 4). Virginia Jackson (2015) suggests, in her work on Berlant, that genres are "modes of recognition" that address and hail us. My dissertation considers the ways in which pro wrestling's genre addresses and hails participants, and how participants enter and perform within these scenes of address.

Kayfabe, Affect, Work

Across my analysis of the professional wrestling industry and culture, I investigate the dynamics of kayfabe, affect, and work.

Kayfabe

Kayfabe is perhaps the most debated term in pro wrestling culture and is a central analytic of this dissertation. Most conceptions frame kayfabe as the unreal or the fictional in wrestling. In my interviews, which I will describe later in this introduction, kayfabe was described as a pro wrestling "canon," similar to the ways that particular narrative events in comic books or films are considered official or genuine (D. Bray, personal communication, March 8, 2023). Interviewees explained that kayfabe has "evolved over time," but involves audience members "submitting to the suspension of disbelief" (J. McGee, personal communication, March 1, 2023), and that "kayfabe is dead and for good reason. We all get it, we all got it. It's scripted" (D. Mitchell, personal communication, March 4, 2023). Within pro wrestling studies it has been defined as "con or a deception" (Mazer, 1998) and the "illusion of realness" (R. T. Smith, 2014). I keep these nuances of kayfabe in mind as I perform my analyses, recognizing the term as

shifting and complex.

Eero Laine (2020) has written extensively on how "kayfabe is constantly being produced" in the present (p. 198), and emphasizes its conceptual richness by offering three analytical modes of kayfabe—"(cruel) optimism," "cynicism," and "critique"—that he identifies in audiences' relationships with wrestling. Audiences perform a (cruel) optimism orientation to kayfabe by remaining hopeful that a "story can be rewritten," while recognizing that "one is rarely in position" to enact such changes to pro wrestling's narratives or production strategies (i.e., booking, sets, gimmicks, etc.) (p. 198). From a cynical stance, audiences "know the fight is not only fixed but designed to keep [them] engaged and paying customers, and [they] watch it anyway" (p. 199). Keying on the "critique" mode, Laine suggests that audiences' ability to recognize kayfabe "becomes not only a means for reading professional wrestling, but a mechanism to critique many complex systems and markets and perhaps global capital itself" (p. 202). Laine's theorization of orientations to kayfabe emphasizes that kayfabe is experienced individually and collectively, and provides frames for investigating participant practices.

My understanding of kayfabe builds on Laine (Laine, 2018, 2020) and my previous work with Laine and Michael J. Altman. In a special issue of the *Professional Wrestling Studies Journal* focused on kayfabe, we (2022) argue that it is almost impossible to separate the fictional and the real in professional wrestling. We make the case that "kayfabe is made up of and sustained by both work [fictional] and shoot [real]. That is, there is not a dichotomy between work and shoot, but rather an interplay and co-constitutiveness that makes up kayfabe" (p. 5). Kayfabe is not "all encompassing; however, it can encompass just about anything it touches" (p. 5). I put forth in this dissertation—as I did with Laine and Altman—that kayfabe can best be understood as a "structure of feeling" (R. Williams, 2015, p. 23). We (2022) explain that "[t]o

take kayfabe then, as a structure of feeling, is to approach it as a 'forming and formative process' that draws upon shifting social, cultural, and material relationships, institutions, narrative and performance genres in the ongoing present" (p. 7). By approaching kayfabe as a structure of feeling, we can attend to pro wrestling's feelings of realness, "meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt" in the present (Williams, 2015, p. 23). My use of kayfabe enables investigations into how what is felt to be real shapes and is shaped by the material and social conditions of the wrestling industry and culture.

Affect

Scholarship on the felt is, therefore, key to my analysis. I engage affect theory and feminist scholarship on emotion and feeling alongside pro wrestling's critical theory and praxis to analyze how pro wrestling's affective responses are practiced. Pro wrestling's vernacular language offers multiple terms for discussing the affective qualities of its performance and culture. During performances, wrestlers aim to "get over with a crowd" or "pop a crowd" (elicit a strong, positive affective reaction of cheers and clapping). "Hot crowd" refers to loud and responsive in-house audiences and/or "heat" (negative reactions, such as booing or chanting "Bullshit!"). The terms "hot" and "heat" suggest the degree or intensity of feelings a crowd experiences in relation to the wrestling match. Some crowds can be hotter than others, and some wrestlers "get" more heat from the crowd. "Pop" operates in the same way. However, "pop" also connotes a split-second, explosive reaction driven from the bodies of fans by a momentary beat in the performance.

Similarly, pro wrestling fans, bookers, and media makers emphasize the importance of affective experience in pro wrestling. For gear maker Val Quartz, "[e]motions in wrestling are the entire reason I watch it" (V. Quartz, personal communication, February 18, 2021). Scholar

and musician Jacqui Pratt gets at the active work that emotions do in pro wrestling: they "grab" attention and audiences (J. Pratt, personal communication, February 2, 2021). Ballantyne declares that "When it hits, it hits." She explains, "When you cannot wait to see what happens next week, that's the kind of emotions I want" (S. Ballantyne, personal communication, February 8, 2021). Their accounts of emotion as a fundamental component of wrestling engagement offer a frame for investigating how affect circulates and becomes invested in pro wrestlers and pro wrestling companies.

I analyze affect "via the process through which it registers and becomes communicable" in pro wrestling, including in vernacular language, ritualized practices, mediatized expressions, and social action (Rentschler, 2017, p. 12). Affects are thought to surround and envelope as atmospheres (Ahmed, 2014; Anderson, 2014; Berlant, 2011; Brennan, 2004) and to accrue and drive attention and action (J. Dean, 2015). Affect occurs "in the midst of *in-between-ness*: in the capacities to act and be acted upon" (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010, p. 1). It is a "state of relation *as well as* the passage (and duration of passage) of forces or intensities" (p. 1). Margaret Wetherell's (2012) "affective practices" approach considers the normative and disruptive possibilities of affect by defining affect as "embodied meaning-making" that takes shape in "local orders" and from "formative background conditions that are social, material and spatial as well as physiological and phenomenological" (p. 2, 79). Affect, in pro wrestling and elsewhere, is open to moral and normative assessment, and is "woven together with people's usual communal methods for describing, accounting for, and judging self and others" (p. 116). Her work shapes my examination of how pro wrestling's affective practices construct perceptions of authenticity and performance, and develop into an affective canon for its communities and social formations (p. 116). It sets the ground for considering how and participants' affective

expressions conform and diverge from the canon.

My project tracks the accumulation of affective value and emotional capital associated with wrestlers, promotions, and narratives. Here I draw on Sara Ahmed's phenomenological and discursive analysis of the making and movement of emotion in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2014), and Clare Hemmings' examination of feminist "citation patterns" and "discursive framings" in "Telling Feminist Stories" (2005) to consider how an affective orientation or investment in pro wrestling is produced and maintained. Ahmed's (2014) model of affect is a "contact zone" in which "words for feeling, and objects of feeling, circulate and generate effect [as they] move, stick, and slide" (p. 14). It provides insights into considering how emotions shape bodies and social bodies, establishing some bodies as ideal and others as figures of disgust, hate, or fear (pp. 15–16). Most importantly, Ahmed's analysis offers tools for considering which bodies are allowed entry in particular industry spaces and how materials are distributed. Ahmed's work is useful for examining how materials, opportunities, emotions, and energies are distributed within wrestling.

Complimentarily, Hemmings (2005) offers that "stories can be marked by different types of affect" and shaped through techniques of citation (p. 116). Although Hemmings' (2005) analysis examines academic feminist publication and pedagogy, her approach suggests that attending to the repetition and reproduction of particular wrestling narratives (both in-ring and out-of-ring) might offer insights into the ways that affective investment is affirmed and reproduced in wrestling culture (p. 119). It also provides a frame for examining how certain modes of storytelling, productions of kayfabe, or wrestlers may be exalted in ways that exclude other narratives or individuals, particularly those from marginalized positionalities, including women, queer persons, racialized persons, and disabled persons.

Work

My final key analytic is work. The value of work is central to professional wrestling and work is a popular topic of its discourse. In "Work and Shoot" Broderick Chow (2014) details how wrestlers are known as "workers" and their physical performances are described as "working the crowd" (p. 74). The prevalence of work terms in pro wrestling exemplifies how "like any performance art, there is a business built around [pro wrestling]" (J. Pratt, personal communication, February 2, 2021) that shapes how matches come to be made and understood; "pro-wrestling is a cultural production, but it is *also* labor" (Moon, 2022, p. 21). For Chow (2014), work's prevalence in pro wrestling's vernacular language reveals that "work implies a politics beyond what is actually represented in the ring" (p. 74). He explains that "wrestling work" is "a practice of trust and care. In the ring, wrestlers put their bodies at great risk and trust that their partners will have the embodied knowledge to protect them" (p. 79).

At the same time, wrestlers engage a practice of "working loose" (p. 74). Although a booker places the fix in the wrestling match, the wrestlers generally decide how a match should be "worked" or performed. Working loose carries two meanings. It describes an ethos of working with pro wrestling's generic structures, while not over-planning the action of the match and leaving room for improvisation so that "something [can] happen" (p. 74). For Chow (2014) in-ring work models resistance and solidarity in the face of pro wrestling's precarious and exploitative industry (p. 82).

My analysis considers the professional wrestling industry and its culture as inseparable. In *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries,* Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John Thornton Caldwell (2009) frame production studies as an investigation into production as a culture that analyzes "up and down the food chain of production hierarchies," and seeks to

understand how "people work through professional organizations and informal networks to form communities of shared practices, languages and cultural understandings of the world" (p. 2). At the same time, professional wrestling is not a singular entity. Elsewhere, Caldwell (2009) makes the case for unsettling academic perspectives that approach "the" media industry as a "monolith" (p. 200). Rather, he finds, the industry is "comprised of numerous, sometimes conflicted and competing socio-professional communities, held together in a loose and mutating alliance" (p. 200).

Feminist media scholars investigating social media (Duffy, 2018), music (Baym, 2018), tech (Marwick, 2013), and porn industries (Berg, 2021) offer productive conceptions of labour that shape my analysis of the work done by wrestlers, media makers, gear makers, and other pro wrestling participants. Their work examines the slippery divisions between labour and leisure, particularly for women, and the tensions between practices of creativity and commerce (Duffy, 2018, pp. 6–7). Their works also elucidate the different forms that labour can take and situate these forms within larger structures of material, social, economic, and discursive power. They give space to consider multiple forms of labour, including care work and pain management, as wrestling work. My feminist media industries studies approach to pro wrestling offers a framework for investigating the particularities of the local scenes *and* transnational promotions, and participants' experiences across these sites.

Finally, a "working loose" approach shapes this dissertation. Because labour is always on display during pro wrestling matches, and because pro wrestling practices spill from the ring to other cultural and work spaces, I consider the "value and meaning that work might hold for both worker and spectator," and attend to how ideologies and feelings of and about work are negotiated in disparate pro wrestling spaces (Chow, 2014; Warden et al., 2018, p. 207). My

project asks: How far does pro wrestling's "ethic of openness" extend outside of the ring (Chow, 2014, p. 80)? What practices of care operate between wrestlers, and between wrestlers and other participants? Taking a "working loose" approach, perhaps, offers a gentle, generous, and generative mode of scholarship that aims to move with the ways that pro wrestling's "many kinds of object and events *mean*, in many heterogenous ways and contexts" (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 8).

Methods

This project builds on an early practice of working loose and on methods and questions developed in my previous work on wrestling culture. My research corpus was initially shaped through processes of learning the storytelling conventions of pro wrestling, of being moved (to shrieks, to joy, to laughter, and to tears), and of following relational lines of love and friendship to wrestling events and media since early 2016. Focused research on this project began in May 2019 when I attended All Elite Wrestling's inaugural pay-per-view event Double or Nothing and unofficial fan convention Starrcast in Las Vegas, Nevada. Although I do not perform much direct analysis of these events in my dissertation, the dynamics of performance, mediatization, merchandizing, and discourse I observed on a broad scale set the course for how I would define my key areas of analysis.

Overall, I conducted discourse and visual analyses of professional wrestling media and performances, and ethnographic research, including participant observation, an online survey, and semi-structured interviews with pro wrestling participants. However, due to the COVID19 pandemic, I shifted my focus more towards analyses of pro wrestling media (i.e., television broadcasts, social media, and cultural objects) than participant observation at live events. Professional wrestling overall was shaped deeply by limits on social gathering and pandemic

restrictions. As I've (2022) written elsewhere:

> Even as the National Basketball Association and National Hockey League suspended operations due to COVID19 public gathering restrictions, AEW, which seemingly requires in-house audiences more than competitive sports do, continued to produce its quarterly-scheduled PPVs and weekly cable broadcasts, without the impassioned in-house fans that co-produce the affective meaning of its matches and television programs. From March 2020 until May 2021, AEW maintained its television ratings and increased its PPV buys, drawing its at-home audience in the absence of its in-house crowds (V. Smith, 2021) (p. 293).

Pro wrestling has largely returned to business as usual since lockdown measures have been lifted.

My project was also shaped by professional wrestling's Speaking Out movement, which began in Summer 2020 when multiple participants from pro wrestling spaces across the globe revealed experiences of sexual harassment and abuse enacted by major and independent wrestlers, promoters, and other participants. Prior to Speaking Out, I had intended to discuss the unionization work and the seemingly pro-sex and feminist work of two of the wrestlers identified as abusers. I therefore shifted my focus to other sites of study. While I do not address the Speaking Out movement in a substantial manner, it does shape questions of safety, care, and structures of power that this dissertation examines overall and particularly in Chapter Four. I asked every interviewee about their reaction to the movement. All spoke about how they hoped it would change the industry for the better, but many were unclear about what that would look like, particularly while COVID19 restrictions were still in place. While I believe the Speaking Out movement to be a key moment and process in pro wrestling, I did not believe I had the space to

fully examine it within the confines of this dissertation. I hope that I might do so in the future.

Ethnographic Research

With Research Ethics Board approval, I surveyed and interviewed pro wrestling participants from December 2020 to March 2021.

Survey

My online survey received ninety-nine responses from December 9, 2020 and January 20, 2021. An invitation to participate in the survey was posted on my personal Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram accounts, and shared by the Professional Wrestling Studies Association, and pro wrestling promotions, including C*4 Wrestling in Ottawa and Premier Championship Wrestling in Winnipeg. The respondents were between the ages of eighteen and fifty-one, with more than half of the participants in the thirty to thirty-nine age range. Seventy-seven respondents identified as male/cis-male, sixteen as female/cis-female, two as non-binary, one as female/gender fluid, one as agender, one as genderqueer. One participant chose not to disclose their gender. Eighty-three percent of respondents identified as white/Caucasian. The remaining respondents identified as Asian, Hispanic/Latinx, and Indigenous. Approximately forty percent of respondents were located in Canada, including eighteen in Manitoba and seven in Quebec. Approximately fourteen percent were located in Europe, thirty-nine percent in the United States, three percent in Australia, and one percent in Central America. I did not include a question on sexuality or class. This was an unfortunate oversight on my part that limits the survey.

My survey questions focused on:

- which roles respondents had in pro wrestling (i.e., fan, wrestlers, ring announcer, scholar, etc.)
- which promotions respondents regularly watched or followed and how

many hours they spent engaged with pro wrestling culture

- engagement with indie wrestling in-person and online
- if participants engaged with other forms of pro wrestling media (i.e., social media, podcasts, journalism)
- favourite wrestlers and why
- use of pro wrestling slang

Respondents were offered the opportunity to share further comments about how they participated in pro wrestling at the end of the survey.

Interviews

Over February and March 2021, I conducted Zoom interviews with eighteen participants, including wrestlers, podcasters/journalists, bookers/promoters, ring announcers, photographers, merchandise sellers, a gear maker, and fans. Many participants identified their participation in wrestling as taking shape through multiple roles. Almost all described themselves as fans. I drew my interviews from friends and contacts in the local scenes in the Montréal-Ottawa area and Winnipeg, and from participants who I was aware of on social media from my own interest and participation over the last six years. Some interviewees recommended and helped facilitate interviews with other pro wrestling participants. I had expected to use my survey to approach more participants to interview. However, because I was not able to attach email addresses to individual results on an anonymous survey and comply with the ethics review, I chose to look at the survey as a source for some general observations regarding participant practices and discourses. At the same time, this allowed me to prioritize contacting participants from marginalized positionalities, including women, queer people, and racialized people, as expert sources for my interviews. All interviewees were located in Canada or the United States. The

interviewees included ten men, seven women, and one genderqueer individual. Five interviewees identified as part of the LGBTQ+ community and five interviewees identified as from racialized groups. Many interviewees' identities positioned them in intersecting categories of social disadvantage. Interviews were scheduled for one-hour. However, most interviews lasted longer, including two that lasted over two hours. All interviewees agreed to be named in the project findings.

My interview questions focused on:

- how interviewees became involved in pro wrestling
- how interviewees describe pro wrestling, pro wrestling slang, kayfabe, the role of fans, and the role of emotions
- how interviewees regularly participated in wrestling as workers and/or fans (i.e., their work processes, typical wrestling watching and/or listening practices)
- if they experienced or witnessed pro wrestling injuries
- how the COVID19 pandemic has shaped their experience
- their response to the #SpeakingOut movement
- merchandise

I concluded each interview by asking interviewees what they looked forward to most when live audiences would return to wrestling and if there was anything that they would like to talk about that my questions had not allowed them to address. I understand all participants as "smarks" with the understanding that all knowledge is partial and situated. I largely refer to pro wrestling participants by their professional or stage names—the names they are broadly known by at pro wrestling events—rather than their "wallet" or legal names.

Chapter Breakdown

Each of my chapters is organized around a professional wrestling concept and/or practice: predetermined finishes (the fixing of match outcomes), shooting, gimmicks, and bumping. Across each of these chapters, I use the pro wrestling terms to elucidate the ways that wrestlers and other participants negotiate pro wrestling's performance and labour conventions to elicit or express affective and financial investment, establish belonging, and offer care in response to precarity. My investigation into the business of pro wrestling begins in the wrestling ring to outline how pro wrestling's liminal genre takes shape through its performance conventions. It then turns to other sites of work and performance to demonstrate how its liminal genre conventionalizes discourses, media use, and professional and social relationships outside of the ring. It makes the case that all these texts and practices—not just matches—are professional wrestling.

Chapter One - In the Fix: The Affective and Generic Rigging of Pro Wrestling builds my framework for analyzing professional wrestling as a liminal genre, and outlines the fundamental conventions of wrestling performance and work. It analyzes an acclaimed 2017 match between Kenny Omega and Kazuchika Okada and its surrounding media, including the YouTube series *Being the Elite* (2016 - Present). It explains how pro wrestling makes use of the in-between times and spaces of its narrative structures and production. This chapter identifies three interconnected intervals of suspense that structure professional wrestling—kayfabe, the match, and the pin-fall, where a wrestler must pin his opponent for three seconds to win the match—to investigate how the genre organizes work and performance practices, and situates participants, including wrestlers, audiences, and other workers. Drawing on scholarship on suspense (Pape, 2019; Thain, 2017) and genre (Berlant, 2008; L. Williams, 1991), I investigate how professional

wrestling performances and media employ procedures of delay and repetition that produce the sensations of *something "real" happening* in its seemingly fixed conditions. I demonstrate how this affective rigging engages wrestlers and fans to practice forms of tentativeness and attention to consider how matches, narratives, and industry decisions might play out. I suggest that it is through this conventionalized orientation to pro wrestling that pro wrestling's affective excess circulates and enables an intimate public to emerge.

Chapter Two - Shooting: "Authenticity Work" and Branding Realness digs into pro wrestling's in-between spaces and analyzes pro wrestling media produced away from the ring. By investigating "shoot interview podcasts," it makes the case that talk is as essential to the professional wrestling industry as the physicality most associated with the performance genre. A "shoot" is the opposite of "a work" (a con), and therefore, describes something real. In shoot interview podcasts wrestlers appear as themselves to discuss their real lives and experiences in the industry. In this chapter, I investigate how professional wrestlers perform shoot talk to build fan and industry support for themselves and the new company All Elite Wrestling. Analyzing their discursive frames, I argue that wrestlers make appeals to their realness by narrating their "pedigree," work, and "money trail" (Consalvo & Paul, 2019) in ways that conventionalize accounts of who and what a real professional wrestler is. These frames generate professional opportunities, but also maintain hierarchical structures that limit opportunities for marginalized wrestlers, who must also navigate these citational norms in their shoot talk and perform additional authenticity work to make themselves legible as professional wrestlers. I demonstrate how shoot interview podcasts normalize industry hierarchies and shape feelings of realness which enable and constrain what types of wrestlers, wrestling stories, and intimate publics "are brought into being" (Consalvo and Paul, 2019, p. xxxiv).

Chapter Three - Getting the Gimmick Over: The Material Rigging of Professional Wrestling examines the dynamics of labour, affect, and material culture connected to the gimmick personas of professional wrestlers. Gimmicks are ubiquitous and central to professional wrestling (Jansen, 2021). The term refers to wrestlers' personas, costumes, merchandise, and mechanisms used during matches. My analysis focuses on iterations of the gimmick persona (character, photographs, gear, and merchandise) to explain how wrestlers develop complex gimmicks to stand out from each other, access employment opportunities, and produce fan affiliation and affinity that is expressed, in part, through financial investment in wrestlers. I engage Sianne Ngai's (2020) articulation of gimmicks as "overrated devices that strike us as working too little (labor-saving tricks), but also as working too hard (strained efforts to get our attention)" to investigate how gimmicks generate affective and monetary value for performers and companies (p. 1). My examination tracks how performances of gimmicks have shifted throughout wrestling's history as the media contexts of their performances have also shifted and expanded. I argue that gimmicks increasingly demand excess work from wrestlers and other participants, many of whom are underrecognized as industry workers, including photographers, gear makers, and merch sellers. By tracking the relationships of work and affect around the gimmick, I identify how gimmicks are products of collaboration and care.

Chapter Four – Bumping: Demonstration, Imitation, and Correction in Pro Wrestling Production takes the foundational practice of "bumping," or intentionally falling to the mat during matches, as a starting point to examine how social and material practices manage conditions of belonging and pattern the ways that pro wrestling is produced. Wrestlers learn to bump through "demonstration, imitation, and correction" (Chow, 2014, p. 77), and it is through learning to bump that an individual can begin to identify and belong as a wrestler. Bumping is

also a source of pain that shapes how long a wrestler can wrestle and maintain their place as an active wrestler. This chapter takes bumping as a productive term to analyze how backstage production, including first aid, catering, and booking, is also conventionalized across promotions through demonstration, imitation, and correction. It builds on the work of wrestling critic Eric Shorey (2021) to draw connections between the pain of physical bumping and the suffering caused by social exclusion and violence, experienced most significantly by marginalized wrestlers. It then examines how participants at three indie promotions are bumpin' against industry conventions by increasing accommodation for wrestlers' physical needs and the social needs of marginalized participants, particularly queer and racialized participants. Bumpin' accounts for how such work is *happening* work that reimagines how wrestling can operate in ways that mitigate suffering and increase belonging for those who are often marginalized. Finally, it closes by focusing on two sets of texts (*Paris is Bumping* (Dixon, 2020) and a collection of photos of queer and racialized wrestlers) to examine how queer and racialized participants are encoding bumpin'—sensations of excitement and "happening" spaces—into texts. I suggest that these texts create new spectacles of queer excess from which to "fix" or determine wrestling's future. This chapter brings together many of this dissertation's key concerns around bodies, performance, precarity, care, and queerness to illustrate how the work of fixing pro wrestling is always-already-ongoing.

Professional wrestling studies is a new field in which the theoretical and political groundwork is just being laid. With this dissertation, I aim to join Jacqui Pratt (2019), Nina Hoechtl (2017), Benjamin Chow (2017), Amy Siegel (2020), Rachel Wood and Ben Litherland (2018), in treading feminist paths by bringing feminist and queer scholarship, approaches, and

methods to bear on pro wrestling (Ahmed, 2017, p. 15). As Siegel (2020) writes, "A feminist intervention into the world of wrestling has the potential to create a radical performative space where vulnerability, experimentation and cooperation are valued over conventional binary frameworks of winning and losing, success and failure, vulnerability and strength, and emotions and intellect" (p. 166). This dissertation aims to insert new questions regarding genre, gender, sexuality, race, class, labour, affinity, and embodiment to analyses of the pro wrestling industry and culture. In so doing, it seeks to create more room for feminist and queer scholars to feel at home in professional wrestling studies and pro wrestling culture more broadly.

At the same time, *Killing the Business* seeks to bring a largely overlooked industry to media studies and industry studies. By highlighting pro wrestling as a genre of betweenness, it aims to identify and analyze the intersections of seemingly separate industries, including live performance, television, podcasting, and merchandising to draw attention to broader cultural discourses and entertainment labour practices. This dissertation offers a unique set of examples for examining the entanglements between branding, bodily performance, care, and affective and digital labour. Overall, it aims to offer insights into how creative industries more broadly are reworking their commercial models across the relationships between performers, fans, merchandisers, and other media producers.

Chapter 1

In the Fix: The Affective and Generic Rigging of Pro Wrestling

On June 11, 2017 Kenny Omega faced off with heavyweight champion Kazuchika Okada in a one-fall, sixty-minute-time-limit match for the International Wrestling Grand Prix (IWGP) championship, New Japan Pro-Wrestling's highest title. Before they even locked up, spotlights beamed on their muscular figures within the wrestling ring and pushed a curtain of darkness over the 11,000 fans in Osaka Jo Hall. The dark backdrop blended with the excited soundscape of audience cheers and applause, and washed the arena in an atmosphere of anticipation, suspense, and uncertainty.

Figure 7. Kazuchika Okada and Kenny Omega stand in opposite corners moments before their match starts. Still from New Japan World Dominion 6.11 broadcast (New Japan Pro-Wrestling, 2017).

On the English broadcast, commentator Don Callis declared, "This is what the world has been waiting for, the most eagerly anticipated rematch, maybe, in pro wrestling history" (New Japan Pro-Wrestling, 2017). Their previous one-fall bout, five months earlier, went forty-six

minutes and forty-five seconds until Okada successfully hit his finishing move "The Rainmaker," a clothesline forearm across the neck, and pinned Omega to retain his title to a cavalcade of elation. When the crowd erupted then, they cheered not only for Okada's victory, but in appreciation and recognition of what happened in between the opening bell and the final pin.

Professional wrestling's cultural practices—its sporting, aesthetic, media and performance conventions—invite audiences into the in-between and to experience suspension. As I described in the introduction, professional wrestling is real, but pre-determined, fixed, but not fake. Its audiences know that *the fix is in*, but that it is more than the win or the "finish" that matters. Rather, what matters is wrestling's generic, but indeterminate, excessive, affective intervals—its intervals of suspense, between wrestling shows, between the opening bell and the fixed ending, and between the count of 1-2-3 in the pin-fall. As film scholar Alanna Thain explains in *Bodies in Suspense: Time and Affect in Cinema* (2017), suspense is not the cessation of movement or action. Rather, it is a generative and affective process in which "*Something is happening"* (p. 2). The affective experience of suspense in pro wrestling matches is produced first in the ambiguity and uncertainty of the blood, sweat, slaps, pulled punches, pins, near misses, near-falls, and false finishes. Outside the ring, it is generated in the stories wrestlers and participants tell, in industry rumours and practices, and the performances in and out of character in mediated and everyday moments. This dynamic and ambivalent tension between competitive, unpredictable sport, and scripted, theatrical performance, between the contingencies of competition and the pre-determined fix, is the affective and generic rigging of pro wrestling— a technique for generating wrestling participants' investment and sustaining the industry and cultural scenes. And it is performed through intervals of suspense.

This chapter's analysis is made up of two parts. In the first part, I examine the "undetermined in-between" of the Omega-Okada II match, a match that makes extensive use of the in-between time of wrestling's narrative and production (Pape, 2019, p. 160). I explore the Omega-Okada II match and how it was structured as part of a "program" or narrative told across a series of four matches between wrestlers Kenny Omega and Kazuchika Okada from January 2017 - June 2018. I identify how aspects of suspense, potentiality (a sense of the possible), uncertainty, divergent investments, and practices of care shape the experience and structure of the predetermined fix. To do so, I bring in work on genre from Lauren Berlant (2008, 2011) and Linda Williams (1991) alongside Alanna Thain's (2017) work on anomalous cinematic suspense, and Toni Pape's (2019) analysis of pre-emptive television show formats, such as those in *Damages* and *Breaking Bad*, where audiences encounter the future in advance of the past, not unlike pro wrestling.

Pro wrestling is a genre of ongoing betweenness, transition, and passage. My analysis attends to this liminality by identifying three interconnected intervals of suspense that structure Omega-Okada II and most professional wrestling matches: 1) the always-already-ongoing practice of "keeping kayfabe" or producing professional wrestling's spectacular "illusion of realness" (R. T. Smith, 2014, p. 2) or "illusion of authenticity" (Pratt, 2019, p. 140) which extends beyond the match; 2) the match itself, from opening bell until the final pin-fall; and 3) the fall or finish, in which a wrestler must pin his opponent for a count of three to achieve the win. I examine the specific ways in which these intervals of suspense organize the experience of wrestling culture and matches. In them, I examine how the genre shapes work and performance practices and thereby situates audiences. In so doing, I explore how audiences' engagement with pro wrestling encourages them to develop an orientation of "engaged uncertainty" (Wrenn, 2007)

and forms of "thinking and doing [that] are *speculative* and *experimental*" and "hold potential" under seemingly fixed conditions (italics in original, Pape, 2019, pp. 37, 158).

Pro wrestling's key generic convention of kayfabe operates as a structure of feeling, a "forming and formative process" that "exert[s] palpable pressures and set[s] effective limits on experience and on action" in the context of contemporary pro wrestling industry and its audiencing dynamics (R. Williams, 2015, pp. 20, 23). Kayfabe names the *feelings of realness* that emerge from the tensions between kayfabe as an extended "theatrical overlay" or "fictional world" (Laine, 2019a, 2020) and a "directive" (Wrenn, 2007) or "way of working" (Laine, 2020) in the industry. It is built from an ethos of "protecting the business" and maintaining the illusion that matches are competitive, despite the open secret that matches are fixed (Laine, 2020).

My analysis centres on the tensions between the real and the performed, and "expectation and suspense," in the overlapping intervals of kayfabe, the match, and the pin-fall in order to reveal the larger structures of temporal and affective liminality built into pro wrestling's structures of feeling. Kayfabe shapes and articulates what feels real or possible in wrestling matches, and it organizes how people practice and experience it. I analyze sequences of delay and repetition in Omega-Okada II through the lenses of temporality, labour, and performance to identify how kayfabe becomes sensible, in part,—as the felt dimensions of wrestling—through the affects and effects of suspense built into the enactment of wrestling's performances. Kayfabe is felt as *something is happening* or *something is about to happen,* as an "experience of potential" (Barney, 2020). Kayfabe is what patterns a sense or feeling of "happenstance" into pro wrestling; it "convey[s] movement" and contingencies within seemingly fixed events (Ahmed, 2017, p. 196).

By focusing on the conventions and experience of a wrestling match, I demonstrate how

the genre's cultural, performance, and labour practices, might impel participants—including wrestlers and audiences—to develop, what Pape (2019) calls "an ethics of attention," a practice of tentativeness and carefulness that holds open uncertainties, potentialities and contingencies in the fix (pp. 124, 166, 173). This ethics of attention takes shape alongside participants' (i.e., wrestlers, promoters, audiences, media makers, and others) feelings of relief, joy, anger, and resignation in the moment, depending on the wrestling narrative being told and participants' social and personal attachments. It is through this conventionalized orientation and a sense of shared feelings and ethics that the intimate public (may) form(s) (Berlant, 2008, p. 5).

In this chapter's second part, I return to the first interval—the always-already-ongoing interval of suspense between matches produced by the practice of keeping kayfabe—and analyze the "Dominion Fallout" episode of the YouTube series *Being the Elite* (Being The Elite, 2017). "Part travel vlog, reality show, and wrestling show, *BTE,* which entangles fictional wrestling stories and real behind-the-scene footage, initially followed the wrestlers through what appeared to be a relentless loop of travel, matches, t-shirt selling, and autograph signing as they worked with New Japan, the American promotion Ring of Honor, and other indie companies" (Fontaine, 2022, p. 294). This episode documents and mediates the wrestlers' lives outside the ring in the moments before and after Omega-Okada II. By examining "Dominion Fallout" after my initial investigation of the three entangled intervals, I illustrate how pro wrestling conventions shape labour and audience practices and how participants might bring an ethics of attention and care to spaces and texts outside the wrestling ring. I examine how *BTE* extends the narrative of the Omega-Okada II match and stretches the ongoing interval of suspense through film and narrative techniques of flashforwards/backs, delay and repetition. It produces kayfabe by "breaking it" in the process of depicting and circulating seemingly authentic backstage moments (Pratt, 2018).

Here I build on pro wrestling scholarship that examines how kayfabe has been "reconceptualized, reinscribed and reinvented" (Laine, 2020; Pratt 2018, 2019) as participants, including fans, wrestlers, and media makers, use social media to tell in-ring and backstage stories, sell merchandise, and critique, promote, and broadcast matches (Jeffries, 2019a; Litherland, 2014; Reinhard & Olson, 2019a). I structure my argument this way so that I can return to delays and repetitions in the construction of the Omega-Okada narrative in the same manner that pre-emptive television programs and wrestling matches employ flashbacks/flashforwards and call backs to engage in a process of reconsidering what we have already seen. I demonstrate how *BTE* constructs modes of tentativeness that hold open potentialities, uncertainties, contingencies, and moments of care in the ongoing interval of pro wrestling. Finally, I analyze audience responses to identify signs of an ethics of attention and affective investment in the Omega-Okada narrative and the wrestlers themselves.

Analyzing pro wrestling's generic conventions around the focus of its in-betweenness and timed intervals reveals how the industry mediates and patterns structures of feeling around its management of time. These structures of feeling are sustained in and out of the ring in ways that gather and organize "intimate publics" of fans, wrestlers, media makers, and other participants in pro wrestling (Berlant, 2008), fueling participants' material and affective investments that are crucial to sustaining the industry. My aim is to set a foundation for how the generic forms of wrestling performances and labour can conventionalize the in-between work and social spaces, which will be explored more closely in later chapters.

Interval I: Kayfabe and Deep Stories

Before we step back into the Omega-Okada II match and begin to work through pro wrestling's liminal genre and the ongoing interval of kayfabe, I pause here to note that, as an

Anglo-Canadian scholar, who watches New Japan programming with English commentary on the online platform New Japan World, I approach the Omega-Okada II match and New Japan media as it circulates in American and Canadian pro wrestling culture. Since it began streaming events with English commentary in 2015, New Japan has increased in popularity in North America. Its broadcasts and matches are significant texts in American and Canadian pro wrestling culture. I interpret New Japan's construction of kayfabe and its storytelling production from this specific context, situated in my understanding of Western storytelling and sports media techniques. I recognize that there are cultural and narrative details that non-Japanese speaking audience members, including myself, do not fully understand and, therefore, do not incorporate them into our interpretations of New Japan wrestling performances and events. However, the legitimating sporting conventions and narratives that New Japan engages are broadly legible to international audiences who are familiar with major sports events and pro wrestling as a performance genre.

Like its American counterparts World Wrestling Entertainment and All Elite Wrestling, New Japan broadcasts employ kayfabe. Kayfabe, what we also might consider the "always-already-ongoing" (Pratt, 2019) interval of suspense, is the most commonly cited component of wrestling's liminality. To refresh, "keeping kayfabe" or producing and maintaining kayfabe is the central tension and organizing ethos of professional wrestling (Pratt, 2019, p. 140). Derived from an old carnival term, kayfabe traditionally refers to "the illusion that professional wrestling [is] a legitimate sport and not scripted" or fixed (Litherland, 2014, p. 531; Schulze, 2014, p. 55). It is part of a complex vernacular language and working practice originally employed by wrestlers and wrestling promoters/company owners to "protect the business" by maintaining a theatrical divide between wrestlers and the spectators or "marks," those who unwittingly believe

the illusion and fall prey to its con (Laine, 2018; Litherland, 2018; Wrenn, 2007). In this tradition, by keeping kayfabe across wrestling media and performances,— through matches, wrestlers' speeches or interviews, and from event to event— the illusion of realness can stretch across all of wrestling culture. Professional wrestling then mimics "the emotional highs and lows of legitimate (i.e., unscripted) sporting events, [and] also heightens and ensures their frequency" (Norman, 2019, p. 83), and can continue to draw affective and material investment from its audiences. Such investment, particularly in the Canadian and American contexts, is demonstrated in loud, frenzied crowds and the purchase of tickets, pay-per-views, and merchandise.

Kayfabe's illusion of realness is informed by performance conventions and patterns the events in the ongoing interval so that pro wrestling is felt as if it is always continuing and building to new climaxes. Pro wrestling blends genres of sporting events, theatrical productions, and soap operas, keeping its feet in recognizable fictional structures and "the real" (Levi, 2008; Pratt, 2019; Reinhard and Olson, 2019; Chow et al., 2017). Kayfabe is mediated through broadcast conventions of large-scale, competitive professional sports media and theatrical storytelling practices. Pro wrestling simulates the sports media event. To "keep" kayfabe, professional wrestling companies work within mainstream sporting conventions and tap into the aesthetics and feelings of realness associated with competitive sport, including how they are shaped by ideologies of fair play and sincerity (Litherland, 2018). At New Japan events, the straightforward set-up of the spotlight ring in the middle of the arena, the photographers snapping shots around it, and the post-match press conferences where wrestlers explain or contest losses, reflect the typical conventions of sports media practices and, in turn, produce a sense of authenticity. New Japan and pro wrestling more generally also draw on sports broadcast conventions of "liveness" (Auslander, 2008) and the video replay, a broadcast tool used to

analyze footage to get to the truth of what has just happened by replaying it, often from different angles, in ways that also tend to exaggerate particular movements and their impacts in the context of competition (Fontaine, 2022; Mulvin, 2014).

Interval I: Narratives

To further heighten the affective climax of the sports media event, pro wrestling employs soap opera-esque narrative feuds that take shape in the ongoing interval. Feud narratives are generally initiated and "fueled by an emotional wrong" (J. McGee, personal communication, March 1, 2023), extend "conflicts between two wrestlers [and] serve to set up and bridge individual matches," building emotional intensity (Chow & Laine, 2019, p. 219). As soon as one feud ends, another begins, always reinvigorating the interval of suspense. When Omega-Okada II takes place, the wrestlers have already begun an extended kayfabe narrative or "angle" that will unfold largely over a series of four matches (known as Omega-Okada I-IV) from January 4, 2017 - June 9, 2018. The feud plays on traditional tropes of the "foreign heel" villain versus the national hero "babyface." The "Rainmaker" Kazuchika Okada had been the IWGP champion for over a year.[6] In the fictional narrative (and perhaps in practice), Okada is New Japan's "rainmaker." He is a product of New Japan's training dojo, consistently draws crowds and money, and puts on acclaimed matches. "The Cleaner" Kenny Omega was, at the time, the leader of Bullet Club, a heel faction or group made up mostly of "gaijin" or non-Japanese wrestlers, many of whom were white and North American. Bullet Club was becoming increasingly popular despite (or because of) their heel antics. Popular opinion among wrestling fans and journalists is that New Japan was building Kenny Omega and the Bullet Club as stars with the hopes that the

[6] "IWGP" refers to the International Wrestling Grand Prix, the governing body of New Japan Pro-Wrestling. However, the IWGP is not a legitimate counterpart organization, but rather a fictional name given to the title to add prestige. It is a kayfabe organization.

wrestlers would connect with the English-speaking audiences as the company made moves into the American market with further development of their streaming platform New Japan World and new events on American soil.

Although it was not publicly known at the time how many matches the narrative would be articulated through, by the Omega-Okada II match, it was clear that Omega and Okada were working an angle together and that the affective stakes were rising. There needed to be a major narrative payoff at the end for the angle to be satisfying. Omega-Okada I had been widely acclaimed. Wrestling journalist Dave Meltzer awarded the match six stars on his five-star rating system (Meltzer, 2017). Their next match was expected to be impressive and engrossing. As New Japan on-air commentator Kevin Kelly described in the opening moments of Omega-Okada II, the match was already anticipated as "the one we've been waiting for" (New Japan Pro-Wrestling, 2017). Kelly both reminded and spoke for the audience: "After forty-six minutes and forty-five seconds [Omega-Okada I] on January 4th, as soon as the bell sounded, everyone wanted that rematch" (New Japan Pro-Wrestling, 2017). To put it in pro wrestling parlance, Omega and Okada were "married" to each other, their narrative trajectories tied together. With each repeated encounter between the two, the ongoing tension was meant to escalate in order to draw the audience into a deeper investment in their storyline. Over their matches, viewers would watch their intensifying feud until it reached a climax intended to leave both wrestlers with more prestige than when it began, even if only one of them held the winner's belt.

Kayfabe's narrative patterning works similarly to what Arlie Hochschild (2016) calls a "deep story" (p. 16).[7] As I explain with Laine and Altman (2022), "A deep story is a 'feels-as-if'

[7] In "Donald Trump Shoots the Match" Sharon Mazer (2018) pairs Hochschild's deep stories and ethnographic work on the American Right with Berlant's "cruel optimism" to think through what she describes as the "professional wrestler-esque types" of American politics. She employs wrestling terms and practices to analyze the rise of Trump as evidence of a rise in wrestling-style politics. However, as Warden et al (2018) point out, Mazer's analysis does

story, ‘a metaphor in motion’ that sets the rules of how we should feel about a particular situation… It is not separate from rational or interpretative analysis, though it incorporates only those facts that fit the narrative, while leaving out those that do not” (p. 10; Hochschild, 2016, p. 16, 295).[8] Understanding that in a wrestling angle a babyface must eventually win to the sounds of a cathartic pop, wrestling audiences read matches with the past and future in mind. The deep story of the babyface win, performed through co-operative in-ring labour, which I will discuss later, frames how wrestlers perform and audiences understand match sequences, matches, and ongoing angles. A deep story about the value of cooperative and careful labour also dictates wrestling feelings. Both deep stories shape how audiences feel about matches and wrestlers; “a deep story patterns the experiences and goings-on of everyday life and the discursive and fictional worlds we encounter into a sensible and sensational narrative that directs our further affective responses and actions” (Fontaine et al., 2022, p. 10). It is a story that, like wrestling, unfolds over time.

In a short hype video package, played in-house and broadcasted for at-home audiences before the match at Dominion, Kenny Omega sets up their match and taps into wrestling’s deep stories. Speaking English, he calls attention to kayfabe’s narrativizing practice at the same time as he works on his feud with Kazuchika Okada. He directs the kayfabe deep story. Remaining in heelish character and addressing Okada and the camera, he describes how they are paired. He states, “Your greatest match of all time. Yeah, you won, but you couldn’t have that match without me.” Like Kelly and Callis on commentary, Omega’s comments in the video package,

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not engage with the critical reading and performance practices of wrestling audiences or wrestling workers. Mazer also does not work through what deep stories might tell us about how the wrestling industry or culture work.

[8] Joan Didion (1979) writes that “We tell ourselves stories in order to live… we interpret what we see, select the most workable of the multiple choices. We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the ‘ideas’ with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria, which is actual experience” (p. 11). This is another way of thinking about how wrestlers and other participants make sense of countless wrestling and non-wrestling events as an ongoing story.

which are accompanied by clips that show exciting and athletic moments from their previous encounter, remind the audience of the Omega-Okada I match and the critical acclaim it subsequently received five months earlier. Omega ascribes narrative and cultural meaning to the images. Heels are typically arrogant and point to their own greatness during talking segments. Despite not having the championships that Okada has, Omega declares himself at the level of New Japan's greatest star. He proclaims that Okada could not be as great without him. Yet, even as Omega puts himself over or talks himself up, he is careful not to belittle Okada's skill and athletic prowess. *Together*, they performed the greatest match of all time. By building up Okada, Omega seeks to guarantee that an eventual victory over Okada will matter in the minds of the fans. It will matter because he will have defeated a formidable opponent.

At the same time, his statement can later be looked back on to show how he respected Okada. He is, perhaps, not as much of a heel as audiences thought. One typical deep story that patterns audiences' affective responses is that of the "face turn"— the changing from a villain to hero in the eye of the fans. Though, at the time, there were many ways this narrative could play out, the conventions of pro wrestling feud narratives suggested (and turned out to be true) that Omega-Okada II was the middle of an Omega belt chase and face turn. The New Japan bookers were drawing out this angle to pull audiences from event to event, suspending anticipation for Omega's heroic win over the course of a year and a half. In Omega-Okada II, Omega began to eschew typical heel habits. He would not cheat. Omega's stable or teammates "The Young Bucks" Matt and Nick Jackson, would not interfere to help him and he would go the distance with Okada. Instead, Omega would demonstrate key characteristics of the wrestling babyface as the matches progress: his fighting spirit or perseverance, expertise, athleticism, and real-life love of New Japan. His win at Omega-Okada IV the following year would come to be expected, but it

would also come to matter to the audiences based on the deep story produced in the suspended interval between when Omega's win was decided on by the bookers and when it finally occurred in the ring.[9]

Interval I: Work

Yet, even once the Omega-Okada or any narrative angle has concluded, the deep story is never wrapped nor the interval cut off. Like soap operas, pro wrestling generally does not have seasons. The action is never fully concluded or halted in the traditional sports sense. Rather, the lack of seasons and the use of feud narratives contribute to kayfabe's "ambiguously always-already-ongoing" (Pratt, 2019) feeling and create an ongoing interval of suspense and anticipation.

Moreover, although kayfabe is largely understood as an open secret, it remains a way of working that aims to protect the illusion of the real. It requires work to maintain, especially for wrestlers who often have to stay in character beyond the ring, impacting wrestlers' lives. Wrestlers often perform their personas in public and on mainstream media, or, conversely, bring their real-life families to ringside to play a part in their matches (Litherland, 2014). They re-work injuries they sustain outside the ring into the in-ring story, or perform fictitious injuries outside of the ring in moments of everyday life. Traditionally, an instruction to "keep kayfabe" means to keep fans in the dark. Marion Wrenn (2007) explains that "as a verb 'kayfabe' can be used as an imperative; as a noun it describes a code of behaviour" (p. 154). This code shaped how Omega

[9] Yet, kayfabe is complex and may extend in multiple directions at once. As the Omega-Okada feud narrative played out, Omega was also enacting an intersecting romantic narrative with Kota Ibushi that also culminated (for now) with Omega's victory over Okada at Dominion in 2018. These intersections have been recounted and narrativized in the Canadian documentary *Omega Man: A Wrestling Love Story* (Chang, 2019) and in a fan-produced tweet thread by Rachel Giuliani (2018) that went viral after being retweeted by Omega. Omega has not been forthcoming about his sexuality and even in the documentary it is unclear whether Omega and Ibushi have been in a real-life romantic relationship. However, because of the Golden Lovers narrative, fans anticipated an Omega-Ibushi reunion or Omega-Ibushi match, even while the wrestlers worked for two different companies (All Elite Wrestling and New Japan). Whether or not it is real, it *feels* real on the screen and for a number of fans.

worked during the Omega-Okada run. In *Omega Man: A Wrestling Love Story* (Chang, 2019), a Canadian documentary that focuses on Omega's belt-run and the romantic narrative of Omega with his on again, off again tag-team partner Kota Ibushi, Omega describes how the conventions of keeping kayfabe require wrestlers to draw everyday boundaries based on if they are heels or faces in the New Japan narrative. "Part of me being a member of the New Japan roster and being a bad guy, while Ibushi was kind of a good guy, we couldn't socialize with one another. When we travel, it has to be separate. When we are in our own private time… we can't be seen together" (Chang, 2019). Likewise, Omega and Okada, as individual opponents and members of rival stables or groups (Omega was in Bullet Club and Okada was in Chaos), would not have traveled or been seen together socializing in public.[10]

To some degree, the fictional in-ring/on-screen feuds of wrestling created a lived effect of separation for wrestlers as workers. Omega claims that to maintain the interval of suspense for audiences, he suspended his relationship with Ibushi. In-ring narrative performance and wrestler labours all spill from the ring into other spaces of work and everyday life. As Pratt (2019) writes, "Reality and fiction, authenticity and illusion… are always-already ambiguously entangled within an ethos of kayfabe" (p. 140). As a result, professional wrestling's suspense stretches not only from match to match, but across professional wrestling culture spaces and texts. This ongoing interval of suspense defines pro wrestling as a liminal genre and how participants engage with it. It is always-already in process, always-already in various stages of transition. It is a performative and affective rigging that shapes sociality and labour.

Interval I: Audiences and Engaged Uncertainty

Pro wrestling's ambivalent techniques define its liminality and create its ongoing

[10] Of course, even Omega's narrative about his separation from Ibushi is worthy of scrutiny. It plays into an ongoing narrative that has huge fan investment. Keeping the narrative going is valuable for Omega's character and brand.

intervals of suspense. In so doing, they position audiences so that they also engage in ambivalent modes of relation to wrestling's performances and affective intensities. Wrestling audiences today are largely smarks. They know that wrestlers, including Omega and Okada, work to avoid hurting each other and that a match's finish is always predetermined by the bookers and/or wrestlers. The fans knew that even before the bell rang at Osaka Jo Hall in 2017 that Omega-Okada II's finish had already been decided. Fans know that wrestlers are working angles and telling stories.

It is from an ambivalent position of smart/mark that they work, think, and feel through the affective and generic rigging of pro wrestling matches, performances, industry, and cultural worlds. Wrestling fans believe that the game of kayfabe is worth playing, not "despite their knowledge of its contrivance" but "because of their knowledge of its techniques" (Wrenn 2007, p. 159). In pro wrestling, audiences expect to encounter the liminality of the real and performed, and to be caught up in the uncertainty of suspense and the ambiguity of the real (Pratt, 2019), not in spite of, but because of its fixed ending. They understand that professional wrestling's "*fictional* narratives unfold through *actualized* bodily acts/labor" (Pratt, 2019, p. 143). They take pleasure in being smart by engaging in forms of critique around booking choices, match performance, and character development. They take pleasure in looking for the real—real injuries, mistakes, emotion, or athleticism—and in losing themselves to the illusion, what many fans describe as "marking out" (Mazer, 1998; Wrenn, 2007). This practice of "marking out," in which the spectator's body appears to be "caught up in almost involuntary mimicry of emotion or sensation" by cheering, crying, and booing, has defined pro wrestling as both a low genre and spectacle of excess, in similar ways to what film scholar Linda Williams (1991) observes in other "body genres," such a melodrama, porn, and horror films (p. 4). In "body genres" audiences

appear "over-involv[ed] in sensation and emotion" (p. 5).[11] It is both the body genre's emotional excess and intensity and the pleasures therein that mark pro wrestling as a liminal genre.

Audience members are liminal participants in wrestling. They are both "smart" about the way wrestling works and "marks" for the excessive emotional pay-offs of matches and narratives. For Chow, Warden, and Laine (2017), professional wrestling is "a uniquely liminal experience" (p. 4). As audiences interact with, parse through, and experience the fictive theatrical trappings of wrestling, they hold in tension the real bodies and the fictional performance in their mind and body at the same time (Chow et al., 2017, p. 3-4). They engage modes of belief and doubt simultaneously, in what Wrenn (2007) calls "engaged disbelief" or "engaged uncertainty" (pp. 150, 161). It is from this affective orientation that professional wrestling fans think and feel through professional wrestling performances, particularly its matches. Wrestling audiences can analyze a wrestler's construction of a series of physical moves for meaning and technique, and also cheer as if the moves were spontaneously performed and not planned by the wrestlers nor already anticipated by the audience. Importantly, then, the conjoined processes of marking out and critique, and the orientation of engaged uncertainty that fans take, are not a failure of relation, but a "condition of intimate attachment and pleasure in its own right": it is a mode of relating to the reencounters of the "pleasure, foreboding, and disappointment" of the generic repetitions, in-betweenness, and suspense of pro wrestling that take shape across all entangled intervals (Berlant, 2008, p. 2).

For fans, it is this sense of a shared intimate attachment to kayfabe with other fans and wrestlers that gathers pro wrestling's intimate public and sustains its investment in the genre.

[11] Linda Williams (1991) also argues that the centrality of the female body in body genres is a dynamic that marks such genres as low. As noted in my introduction, professional wrestling has largely been understood as a hyper masculine performance or "masculine melodrama" (Jenkins 2005). Yet, perhaps, its fixed-ness and soft touches disrupt or queer this hyper-masculinity to further mark it as a low genre.

They are “a world of strangers” that are made familiar to each other because of shared knowledge about and feeling for professional wrestling, a genre largely overlooked as unintelligent and low class (Berlant, 2008, p. 5). As wrestling historian and commentator Pat Laprade noted to me, many fans have experienced feeling embarrassed for being wrestling fans or been mocked for their interest in a “fake” sport (P. Laprade, personal communication, March 16, 2023). They share this experience. However, they also have a shared secret (kayfabe) and orientation to pro wrestling. Participants, including audience members, recognize a shared role in the performance of keeping kayfabe and construction of the pro wrestling that is illustrated in the production of the intervals of the match and the false finish. The wrestling intimate public flourishes as the industry develops a “culture of circulation” around texts and things and “participants in the intimate public *feel* as though it expresses what is common among them, a subjective likeness that seems to emanate from their history and ongoing attachments and actions” (p. 5). Through their pops and cheers, audiences share experiences of being marked by the lowness of pro wrestling’s excessive affectivities and classed status.

Interval II: The Match

It is in the passage from the opening bell to the fixed ending that another interval of suspense in the affective rigging of pro wrestling emerges. In the middle of the match, we see how pro wrestling works through the tensions between wrestler labour and performance, and in the suspense they use to build affective affinities with and investments from audiences. Approximately thirty minutes have passed when Omega sets up an acrobatic moonsault backflip out of the ring. His arms and legs are extended as he rotates swiftly out of the ring onto the floor and Okada.

Figure 8. Okada about to catch Omega as Omega performs a moonsault. Still from New Japan World Dominion 2017 broadcast.

On the performance level of kayfabe, Omega is a fierce competitor challenging for Okada's heavyweight title in this match. He dropkicks Okada and then takes him out by moonsaulting on top of him.[12] On the level of labour, the wrestlers perform what R. Tyson Smith (2014) calls "passion work," "a joint performance of emotional labor conducted with the body" that "create[s] passionate feelings of contempt, indignation, and suspense among the audience" (p. 67-68). Smith (2014) develops his concept of passion work from Hochschild's (2012) influential analysis of "emotional labor," the work required "to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others" (p. 7; Fontaine et al., 2022, p. 7). Hochschild's (2012) research on flight attendants and other customer service agents identified a distinct set of "feeling rules" that guide emotional labor by "establishing the sense of

[12] I have included links to a few GIFs of moments in the Omega-Okada II match. Although I cannot guarantee that the links stay active, if they do and if you should choose to watch them, I suggest that they offer a short interval of suspense or delay in which new insights might be gained. See Omega perform an acrobatic moonsault to the outside of the ring onto Okada at Dominion, New Japan Pro-wrestling, on June 11, 2017. GIF retrieved from https://imgur.com/gallery/HJYNM7E

entitlement or obligation that governs emotional exchanges" (p. 56). On airplanes, flight attendants work to create happy, relaxed customers. In pro wrestling, performers largely work to elicit ecstatic emotions from the crowd. The stage feeling rules, according to Smith (2014), require that wrestlers work to draw awe, anger, and joy from the audience, depending on the deep story already in play. Omega the heel violently attacks the babyface Okada in this sequence. His dropkick emphasizes his aggressiveness. Then, the springboard moonsault sees Omega jump onto the top rope and then backflip onto Okada, who stands on the floor below the ring. It's an awe-inspiring move to which the audience enthusiastically responds with claps and cheers.

The wrestlers abide by a second set of conflicting feeling rules. As Smith (2014) explains, the feeling rules of the passion work performed between the wrestlers relies on "skilled coordination, control, trust, and empathy" to safely complete the performed moves and aims to bring the audience to an emotional frenzy (pp. 67–69). The deep story of wrestling work directs the wrestlers not to hurt each other. In the fight sequence from the 2017 match, Okada willingly turns his back, reacts to the impact of Omega's feet, and then waits for Omega, extends his arms, and breaks Omega's fall. Okada trusts that when he turns his back, Omega will not truly attack him. Omega trusts that Okada will catch him. As Broderick Chow (2014) explains "To lay oneself open to danger makes the move more safe—but it also requires a great deal of trust, as one is placing one's safety in the hands of another" (p. 80). Both sets of feeling rules are in play during the Omega-Okada II match, where wrestlers must manage their relationships to one another and to the audience via the distinct set of feeling rules for each.

It is in these tensions between work and performance that the match's interval of suspense emerges. As audiences read for the deep stories in and across wrestling matches, they

are familiar with these conflicting feeling rules and are able to hold the conflict in tension, that is, in the wrestlers' feeling work to keep one another safe while maintaining the illusion of the fight's realness for audiences. When fans cheer Omega's moonsault, their elation is for the spectacle of the fight and the wrestlers' labour to perform it, a kind of bliss born from their engagement with the ambivalence and uncertainty of wrestling's kayfabe and labour (Wrenn, 2007, p. 161). Their awareness that it is "staged" and their acknowledgement and appreciation of wrestlers' delivery of its potential realness work together to shape audience experience.

Rather than enacting a form of suspension of disbelief where fans avoid or "turn off" critical thinking, the wrestling audience experiences a form of suspense akin to "anomalous suspense": the "intransigent experience of sustained levels of heightened affect experienced by audiences even in the face of a known outcome" (Thain, 2017, p. 6).[13] Although the Omega-Okada II audience does not know the match's exact outcome when they enter the match, they know that there are already two fixes at play that will structure the match interval. First, the Omega-Okada II event has a fixed time limit; a winner must be decided in sixty minutes or less. Second, the finish has already been predetermined by the New Japan bookers and will be performed by the wrestlers accordingly. Similar to pre-emptive television series, where the narrative progression must catch up with a future or pre-empted ending that is revealed at the beginning of an episode or series, a wrestling match must work within similar structures of pre-emption where the narrative and competitive action must catch up to an already decided finish, only it is one audiences *don't know in advance* (Pape, 2019, p. 3). In both pre-emptive television series and wrestling matches, "suspense emerges from the interval between the present" (p. 4)

[13] Anomalous suspense can also name the experience of heightened levels of suspense that can occur when re-watching matches, where the result is already known. At this point I've watched Omega-Okada II on at least five separate occasions and I still find myself holding my breath as Omega moonsaults.

and the fixed ending, and is shaped by "emphatic procedures of delay," "renewal," and repetition (Barthes in Thain, 2017, p. 60). Despite and because of their knowledge of the professional wrestling match's generic techniques, the audience can feel suspense moment-by-moment around the in-ring action, revealing, as Thain (2017) notes, that the experience of anomalous suspense "suggests that the passage to knowing [the finish] is *as* significant, if not more so than the outcome itself" (p. 62).

Wrestling audiences enter the interval of the wrestling match not only to experience suspense and watch the stories unfold, but to participate in the shared production of suspense and other feelings, such as elation, pride, relief, or sorrow. Audiences aim to work *with* wrestlers, "moment-by-moment" to "keep kayfabe" in play and produce wrestling's excess and felt meaning (Chow et al., 2017, p. 4; Reinhard, 2019, p. 43). With the exception of an injury that derails the performance, the ending of the match will not be changed from how it has been scripted. Who will win the match is fixed. Audiences recognize that who wins the match can only come to matter based on an affective experience that engages with what happens in the in-between, and this in-between is anything but certain. As such, audiences attune to the wrestlers' rhythms, rests, and surges of action and intensity, and respond to the wrestlers' performances and labour on the way to the final pin. While some of their emotional responses are practiced through the expectations of the professional wrestling genre—pops/cheers are for the "babyface"/hero, boos/heat are for heels/villains—the improvised and live nature of matches means that there are dynamics that cannot be wholly accounted for in advance. Likewise, there are no guarantees that audience members will abide by the affective and generic conventions during matches.[14] The

[14] Contrary to Omega's statement about the clear boundaries between bad guys and good guys in New Japan Pro-wrestling, Clara Marino (2021) finds in her MA thesis on Japanese pro wrestling that the lines between face and heel are less defined and that the fans at the Omega-Okada IV match the following year cheered for both Omega and Okada. The support for Omega a year later might also be a result of Omega's "face turn" shift to "good guy," which

relationalities between wrestlers and between wrestlers and audiences are what move wrestling stories and produce their affective excess. There are many potentials in the fix.

Approximately thirty minutes into the match, a series of maneuvers climaxes into two pin-fall attempts for Omega. Based on their knowledge of wrestling matches, the progress of the match thus far, and their point in the sixty-minutes, the audience likely does not yet expect a successful fall or victory. We are in the "long middle" in which nothing and everything happens (Pape 2019, p. 162). Their cheers, applause, and gasps hold open the possibility—and the feeling of that possibility—that anything could happen. During a brief moment of rest after Omega dropkicks Okada out of the ring, the audience claps in unison, sonically connecting the previous in-ring action to the upcoming action, and thus maintaining the tension between expectation and suspense as the wrestlers set up again. Their claps seem to encourage and propel Omega's next move—the acrobatic moonsault flip to the outside of the ring onto Okada. Standing on the outside ledge or apron of the ring, Omega springs up to the top rope. His legs wobble briefly, then he flips head over feet, his arms spread wide, and lands on/next to Okada. The audience claps feel like a beat or pulse, a ticking clock, counting down to the finish. They sonically mark the passing of the interval. In the moments that follow, Omega tosses Okada back into the ring, dropkicks him from the top rope, and attempts two pin-falls. On the second, he deadlifts Okada across his abdomen, hoists Okada's legs over his shoulders, and slams his back down to the mat in a heavy sit-down powerbomb. Okada kicks out of the pin, creating what is known as a "false finish." After the crowd sighs in response, Omega's distraught expressions of frustration reinvigorate the suspense of the interval, reminding the audience that although the finish did not come pass, something is still going on here. These types of sequences pattern the wrestling

was facilitated in part by his performance during Omega-Okada II. There is no clear heel in Omega-Okada IV.

match, bringing the possibility of the finish or the fix into the present with every surge of action, the next interval I turn to in my analysis.

Interval III: False Finishes and Finishers

The pin-fall or false finish is an affective and generic rigging technique through which wrestlers and audiences generate and increase suspense and emotions for the fix. It is a procedure of delay that can intensify audience attention. Although matches do not reveal the pre-scripted fix in advance, wrestlers employ false finishes in which a wrestler, having been pinned by their opponent, kicks out before the referee can count to three and declare a winner. False finishes signal a potential finish. Typically, a wrestler attempts multiple falls before he applies and is successful with his "finishing move" or "finisher." Finishers are "protected moves," by which I mean that they are usually associated with a particular wrestler and once applied, are rarely kicked out of by an opponent.

Figure 9. Okada setting up his finisher "The Rainmaker" on Omega near the end of Omega-Okada II. Still from New Japan World Dominion 2017 broadcast.

Thus, the limited occasions when finishers are kicked out of are generally reserved for the final

sequence of the match, where the audience is most likely to believe that they have come to the final fall and can be surprised when an opponent kicks out of a finisher. Audiences, familiar with the wrestlers and wrestling structures, can identify the set-up of the finishing move. As such, the set-up signals the finish. In sequences near the end of the matches, the fervour of the crowd both reflects and produces an increased level of suspense at the approaching fix. These sequences pattern the wrestling match, bringing the fix into the present with every surge of action and potential. The repetition is an "active component [of the audience's] analysis" (Thain, 2017, p. 13); audiences read the structures and patterns. A finisher set-up tells the audience to pay attention so that they do not miss the ending. Correspondingly, feelings of suspense and expectation swell during each fall's "long middle" of the three-second count (Pape, 2019, p. 162).

As the Omega-Okada II continues and time ticks on, the finish becomes more and more present in the minds and bodies of the audience and wrestlers. Reviewing the match on *Wrestling Observer Radio*, hosts and wrestling journalists Bryan Alvarez and Dave Meltzer (2017) note that, as the match progressed, the time calls made over the in-house sound system received bigger and bigger pops.[15] The delays brought on by the finisher pin-fall attempts and the corresponding intervals of three-second-counts heighten audience feelings of suspense and uncertainty about the impending finish and who would win.

[15] Time is also sometimes "worked" in pro wrestling. A match may go to its official time-limit, but the amount of time that has actually passed could be more or less than the time identified by the promotion.

Figure 10. Omega setting up his finishing move the "One-Winged Angel." Still from New Japan World Dominion 2017 broadcast.

The set-up to the finishing move and a pin-fall attempt act like a flashforward, signalling the arrival of the predetermined finish of the match. Working through the procedural television series *Damages*, Toni Pape (2019) argues that the pre-empted ending is "a technique for harnessing expectation and making the viewer trace lines through the interval" (p. 160). He explains that pre-emptive television narratives loop "flashforwards" (scenes of the future) with scenes of the present to compel us to pay close attention to the present, and to make connections (many of which will be wrong) between the present and the foretold future. Flashforwards, which are repeated throughout the series, are recontexutalized with new information and enable different connections to be made with each return. Such connections heighten our sensitivity to potential and uncertainty, and engage us to think-feel through possible trajectories or scenarios that will lead to the already-seen climactic finish—the past future (pp. 160–164).

Although finishing moves do not guarantee a particular finish and the audience does not already know the fixed ending, the application of a finishing move initiates the interval of

suspense within the pin-fall and its three second count. Moreover, the interval between the two and the three count creates time for thinking-feeling more potential trajectories to the fix. Feelings of suspense and expectation swell during each fall's long three-count. The audiences can imagine the finish and their expressions of surprise, exasperation, and/or concern reveal how they hold the intervals of suspension and the eventual fix or finish together in their minds and bodies. As such, the false finish, which delays the final outcome, operates as "a technique for holding potential" (Pape 2019, p. 158).[16]

In Omega-Okada II, the sequence is complex. Throughout the match, Omega has tried to set-up his finisher: his protected finishing move. With approximately fifteen minutes left, he and Okada attempt to exchange finishers. While in past matches Omega has kicked out of Okada's finisher, also named "The Rainmaker," Okada has never kicked out of Omega's finisher, "The One-Winged Angel."[17] Finally, Omega hits it. He lifts Okada onto his shoulder, one leg on either side, then drops Okada shoulders first onto the mat. He pins him, while pulling Okada's leg to his chest. Again, we enter into the interval of the three-count. Referee "Red Shoes" Unno seems to count these three seconds slower than earlier pins, thereby producing a greater interval of suspense, and delaying the audience experience of moving to the next action. As Thain (2017) explains, "Delay becomes not just a withholding to be eventually released, but a paradoxical alternation between movement and stasis that can allow for the emergence of something unanticipated, not simply a filling in of the blank" (p. 37). For a moment we can feel a number of possible outcomes emerging. Omega may win. Okada may kick out. Another wrestler, not in the

[16] Pape (2019) identifies *Damages*' close-ups to be a "technique of holding potential." I return to the idea of the close-up and draw again from Pape later in this chapter.
[17] As of writing, the only wrestler to have kicked out of the One-Winged Angel at a major promotion is Omega's Golden Lovers partner Kota Ibushi. No one in his current company All Elite Wrestling has kicked out of the One-Winged Angel. His finisher is one of the most protected moves currently in pro wrestling.

match, may interfere. Or, as in this case, Okada reaches his foot to the rope to break the count. Or, perhaps, his foot falls unintentionally, from exhaustion. It's ambiguous.

Figure 11. Okada's foot falling under the rope during Omega's pin-fall attempt after applying the "One-Winged Angel." Still from New Japan World Dominion 2017 broadcast.

Meltzer notes that around this time he experienced a feeling that "this might go sixty" but that he held this feeling in tension with the question of "how can they possibly keep their pace for another fifteen minutes" (Alvarez & Meltzer, 2017). The finish feels just so present, but the count is broken and the finish is false.[18]

This indeterminate interval between the two and three-count is the ultimate moment of uncertainty, contingency, and potentiality rigged into professional wrestling. Pape (2019) writes that delays "foreground potential, to emphasize neither what has happened nor what is going to happen but what *can* happen" (p. 158). The delays of the repeated false finishes extend the match's "interval of becoming" to generate suspense as a "technic for an attentive awareness"

[18] See Omega gives Okada his finisher "The One-Winged Angel." *GIF retrieved from* *https://i1.wp.com/media.giphy.com/media/3o752fUgMg3rFWUtY4/giphy.gif?ssl=1*

(Thain, 2017, p. 3), developing what Pape (2019) calls an "ethics of tentative attention" (p. 124). "Tentative" refers not only to carefulness but also to "the nature of an experiment, a trial, or attempt"; "tentative attention creates wiggle room" (Pape 2019, p. 166). Through his analysis of delays and narrative loops, Pape (2019) argues that experiences with pre-emptive television narratives can become a training ground for developing an ethics of attention, a technique that "leaves space for the creativity of the world" (pp. 166–168). My analysis attends carefully to the patterned performances of delay in order to co-compose—with the audience, the wrestlers, the broadcasters, the promoters—the narrative and labour potentialities within the wrestling match.

This ethic of tentativeness is at the heart of wrestling praxis. In "Work and Shoot" Broderick Chow (2014) details how wrestlers engage a practice of "working loose" (p. 74). Although a booker places the fix in the wrestling match, the wrestlers generally decide how a match should be "worked" or performed. Like tentativeness, working loose also carries two meanings. It describes an ethos of not over-planning the action of the match, of leaving room for improvisation so that "something [can] happen" (p. 74). From Omega's comments and the match's performance, it is clear that the ethos of working loose is at work. In a wrestling media interview, Omega explains how he approached his matches with Okada: "This might be something really special and we should just trust in each other. So we went into this match with just complete one hundred percent trust, which is why I did a couple of the things that I did and without even worrying about injuries" (Pawlowski, 2017). The care, openness, and trust practiced by the wrestlers for one another enables them to do the most rigorous and risky work as part of their performance, incorporating forms of improvisation into the already scripted event of the match. It is when something can happen.

Working loose also refers to how a wrestler conducts his body in the match. Wrestlers

use “light touches” and “soft, caring hands” (R. T. Smith, 2014, pp. 71, 102). Although New Japan, as a promotion, is known for matches that are “worked stiff” or “strong style” with hard chops or kicks to the chest as common moves, care and softness in wrestlers’ moves are still apparent. In the moments after Omega gives Okada a knee to the face, they rest on the ropes together and Omega appears to either check in with Okada or call the next move so that Okada may get his body safely in place.

Figure 12. Omega and Okada rest on the ropes after Omega gives Okada a “V-trigger” knee to the face. Still from New Japan World Dominion 2017 broadcast.

By working loose, wrestlers engage in “a process of *mutually* becoming vulnerable” (Chow 2014, p. 80). Although fighters are always vulnerable in the ring, professional wrestlers entrust their bodies to each other. In competitive fighting, a fighter’s seconds come into the ring between rounds, to “support [a fighter] in very material ways” by pouring water into a fighter’s mouth, holding ice packs to swelling flesh, and offering encouragement (A. Dean, 2021, p. 130). Unlike in boxing and mixed martial arts, the pro wrestling match is typically not structured by rounds and therefore, wrestlers must do that bodily work for themselves and one another. A wrestler’s “second” is often his opponent. It can also be members of his “crew” or “stable.” The Jacksons

may perform as Omega's "seconds" during the match, but it is Omega and Okada that support each other in affective and material ways and perform an ethics of tentativeness and carefulness in the ring.

As such, an ethics of tentative attention, generated through experiences with the liminal genre of wrestling, calls for practices of experimentation and practices of care that also connect to audiences and their own desires to ensure the care of wrestlers. In Omega-Okada II, the wrestlers perform highly acrobatic moves that require them to perch on the top ropes of the ring, at least eight feet above the floor, as they prepare to drop down onto the mat. During such moments, the level of care, attentiveness, and worry rises in the crowd. When Omega moonsaults and his legs wobble, the audience is reminded of Omega's vulnerability. It's hard to see, but hands cover faces. Furrowed brows suggest heightened levels of concern. Although they are not open and vulnerable in the same way as the wrestlers, they are engaged in co-producing kayfabe and the emotions it seeks to elicit (Chow et al., 2017; Reinhard, 2019; Warden et al., 2018). They affect and are affected.

Pro wrestling thus "feels real" in that the experience of participating "affects us in real ways" as audiences, even once the house lights have come up (Thain 2017, p. 99). Their bodies are opened and touched in different ways as the excesses of wrestling's liminal experiencing is dispersed and distributed across the bodies of participants.[19] Their cheers not only affirm the performance and labour, but express a sense of relief when a move is safely completed (Chow & Laine, 2014, p. 52).[20] As Judith Butler (2004) reminds, "To be ec-static means, literally, to be

[19] Where Chow et al (2017) argue that the "the centre of this liminal experience is the wrestling body: an excessive body, a body built for spectacle" that is "excessive to theatre and to the combative, competitive sports that it emulates" (p. 4), I would like to suggest that the excessive centre of this liminal experience is more dispersed, and is distributed across the bodies of participants who affect and are affected by the "oversized physical gestures" and performances of oversized emotions and feelings, such as agony, passion, betrayal, and love (p. 4).

[20] In "Working Loose: A Response to 'Donald Trump Shoots the Match' by Sharon Mazer," Claire Warden,

outside oneself, and thus can have several meanings: to be transported beyond oneself by a passion, but also to be *beside oneself* with rage or grief" (p. 24). We see evidence of such "besideness" and tentativeness when injuries occur. While audiences often watch for real accidents or injuries, serious injuries can shift audiences' affective orientation and take them out of the performance and story, sometimes resulting in crowd silence (Fontaine et al., 2022). Claire Warden (2017) explains, "Shock and concern added together breaks through the conventional kayfabe structures, leaving the crowd unsure about the appropriate aural response" (p. 23). In such moments, audiences may be undone by concern or even grief; a quiet suspense extends a sense of care back to wrestlers. As such, I suggest that audiences, like wrestlers, also express care and reveal it as an essential ethic in the fix. By working with this ethic of tentative attention we might begin to attend to the formal constraints and conventions, and the "creativity of the [wrestling] world," "the form[s] of nonlinear processes, contingencies, and accidents" that holds potentialities in an industry of fixes (Pape, 2019, p. 166).

The End of Interval II and III: A Draw

So, let's go to the fix. As time clicks away, Okada attempts to give Omega "The Rainmaker." But Omega is spent; he wilts to the mat, falling into his knees.[21]

Broderick Chow, and Eero Laine (2018) also make the case for the collaborative labour of the wrestlers and fans during the theatrical spectacle and suggest that it "might model a powerful and valuable embodied form of politics" (p. 207)

[21] See Okada attempt to give Omega his finisher "The Rainmaker." GIF retrieved from https://media.giphy.com/media/xTkcEwDwqd1AzWzC36/giphy.mp4.

Figure 13. Omega falls to his knees, missing Okada's Rainmaker. Still from New Japan World Dominion 2017 broadcast.

It's actually quite beautiful. He is, in essence, saved by his vulnerability, his human limits. The wrestlers clearly struggle to keep going over the length of the match. Then, with forty-seconds remaining, Okada finally hits The Rainmaker, sending Omega feet over head to the mat. By this point, Okada is also exhausted and collapses. The arena announcer declares thirty seconds remaining and Okada begins to crawl towards Omega. But it is clear he has nothing left and the time runs out.

Figure 14. Okada and Omega after the final bell. Still from New Japan World Dominion 2017 broadcast.

The fix is in: the match is a draw. Which means the draw was the fix all along. With the draw, the interval of suspense has been stretched to its limit. On one level, tension is broken with the arrival of the fix. On another, the match's undetermined finish prolongs the interval, sustaining suspense and holding uncertainty and potential because there is neither a winner or loser. That determination will have to happen in another match. In the meantime, the wrestlers and audience members remain in the experiment, remain in suspension, remain in the *something* happening. Perhaps we are compelled to sustain our attention, our tentativeness, our investment, our care, and to consider what engaging with uncertainty and working loose might mean beyond the confines of the wrestling ring.

Being the Elite in the Ongoing Interval

So how might audiences remain in the fix? The Omega-Okada II draw exemplifies the always-already-ongoing nature of professional wrestling's kayfabe by leaving audiences in the in-between. It offers a generative opportunity to further attune to how pro wrestling's generic

conventions and expectations, including those of kayfabe, pattern wrestling outside the ring, where wrestling workers and participants continue to engage these conventions and expectations via the labour, talk, and performances that occur in key wrestling media spaces. Kayfabe comes into view as generic storytelling device as well as a structure of feeling. It is brought to bear on participants through the techniques and affects of suspense and uncertainty that we witnessed in the match and pin-fall. It is the sensation that something is happening.

To attend to kayfabe as a structure of feeling and the always-already-ongoing interval of suspense around Omega-Okada II and develop my analysis of attentiveness and carefulness, I turn now to the media produced around the match, particularly the "Dominion Fallout" episode of Matt and Nick Jackson and Kenny Omega's YouTube show *Being the Elite.* In *BTE* we find new repetitions, delays, and procedures that enable us to trace new trajectories to and from the Omega-Okada II match and through the always-already-ongoing interval of pro wrestling. What emerges in this new long middle is another interval of wrestling performance and work, where the *something that is happening* is not only the in-ring work of the false finish/finish or passion work, or the serialized narratives, but the mundane happenstance and practices of everyday life and work. Here I trace new lines through the fix to consider additional forms of planning, vulnerability, and bodily work and care as sites of contingencies and potentialities in the Omega-Okada II finish. Moreover, I identify the formations of an intimate public in the online responses and "affective gestures" (Papacharissi, 2015) in the comments section of the YouTube episode that illustrate the ways that kayfabe's feeling of realness take shape through sensations of suspense.

Since its debut episode in 2016, *BTE* has become a major pro wrestling media text with over three hundred videos and over 500,000 subscribers. The Jacksons and Omega curate *BTE* as

a media space for ongoing investment in their wrestling personas, work, and stories. It operates as a paratext to their televised performances in New Japan and now AEW. In a traditional sense, *BTE "*breaks kayfabe" or "exposes the business" by letting viewers peek into their backstage lives and observe some behind-the-scenes industry practices and spaces. It features "intertextual references through jokes, parodies and comments to other professional wrestling characters, storylines, events and industries" (Reinhard, 2021, p. 109). *BTE* assumes that its audience knows or can come to know the industry, its language, and conventions. Its intertextuality and tongue-in-cheek mix of real and fictional elements provide new opportunities for emotional investment and to develop connections with viewers. Audience members sustain an engaged uncertainty orientation developed from engaging with wrestling matches while watching *BTE* and experience kayfabe as the feelings of realness and sensations of something still happening outside the ring.

Audience members, myself included, continue to think and feel through the real and performed as we tentatively watch the serialized episodes, looking for insider information like DVD Easter eggs to confirm real industry rumours or storyline directions. We draw connections between the out-of-ring and in-ring characters and the deep stories of labour and performance to direct our emotions and our investment. As Brian Jansen (2018) aptly notes, "To refer to the 'real' of wrestling today is to refer to backstage politics, writers' rooms, booking decisions, and corporate judgements about who has star potential, who is popular in the locker room, or who is unpopular with management" (p. 637). We think and feel through kayfabe as the theatrical overlay and narrative *and* as a way of working. For example, on *BTE,* the wrestler-created fictional storylines, including *The Exorcist*-like possession of Cody Rhodes by the "money shakes," intentionally played with the rumours of the wrestlers' real contract negotiations (Being

The Elite, 2018b). At the time, when Rhodes became possessed by the "money shakes," rumours abounded that The Elite would be leaving New Japan for lucrative contracts offered by WWE when their current contracts expired. The real in *BTE* refers to the practices of travel, media production, merchandising, friendship, and storytelling that wrestlers engage in outside of major promotions. It is "a kind of real that, strangely, even contradictorily, embraces the fake" (p. 637).

In *BTE*, participants encounter and create a construction of what happened in the meantime of the Omega-Okada angle, before and after Omega-Okada II, that offers insights into the labour and story as we progress through the ongoing interval of suspense. The "Dominion Fallout" episode operates like the flashbacks and flashforwards of pre-emptive television series, reinvigorating the already-viewed match's affects of suspense and expectation (Being The Elite, 2017). Although not all *BTE* fans watch the New Japan matches and vice versa, the release of the video after the Dominion PPV broadcast suggests the assumption that many viewers will have already seen the match when they watch the YouTube video. Significantly, *BTE* does not feature New Japan broadcast clips of matches in its episodes because the match is copyrighted.[22] When matches do appear on *BTE*, the shots generally derive from footage filmed by wrestlers from the backstage curtain, ringside, or in the ring itself. Audiences expect that if they see the match, it will be from a new angle. They will gain new perspectives into what took place.[23]

Moreover, *BTE's* visible production seams play a role in producing the feelings of realness in the videos. The uneven sound quality, handheld camera shots (mostly filmed on

[22] Early episodes ("Episode 5" and "Episode 10"), which included New Japan footage, have been removed from YouTube, likely because of copyrighted material. The first forty-nine episodes are titled by their numbers. Beginning at "FIFTY," episodes are given titles, many of which include pro wrestling slang and references to the industry or in ring events.

[23] Since the start of AEW some episodes have featured broadcast clips of matches. However, *BTE* match footage largely comes from what is now known as the "Cutler Cam," hand-held camera shots completed by Brandon Cutler, who is both a wrestler at AEW and now *BTE*'s producer.

iPhones), and varying video length, all contribute to *BTE*'s DIY aesthetic and frame the videos as authentic and intimate, even as the wrestlers clearly tell fictional stories. As such, it encourages attentiveness and carefulness from participants. Audience members sometimes need to ride their remotes, increasing and decreasing volume, to catch all of the dialogue, and rewind in cases when listening carefully wasn't enough to hear what the wrestlers said. Uncertainty is rigged with the feelings of realness in *BTE*'s ongoing interval.

In these procedures of delay and renewal, Omega and the Jacksons offer their backstage lives and additional sites of labour to the wrestling audience as new scenes and details to be paid attention to in the context of wrestling and the ongoing Omega-Okada story. They attune us to the everyday happenstance, precarities, sociality, and labor of wrestling. Captioned with "Kenny prepares for his match with Okada. Someone steals all of Nick's belongings," the eleven-minute "Dominion Fallout" episode begins with a flashforward in which Nick, looking in the camera states, "I can't believe someone stole my bag which had two passports in it, as well as two thousand dollars," before transitioning to its theme song and animated opening credits sequence. Like many *BTE* episodes, this episode opens in the mundane, conventional experiences of wrestlers working for a major promotion, yet with the obvious added anxiety that the lost backpack would bring in the middle of traveling. When the episode picks up we find Matt and Nick heading to the train for Osaka presumably the day before Dominion. There's no mention of the bag. Rather, as the wind rumbles on the microphone, Nick, wearing a backpack, talks about how Kenny has a gigantic rematch, and Matt, filming with the iPhone, mentions their new ring gear for Dominion and the long day of travel ahead of them. This brief scene accomplishes multiple tasks at once. First, their comments insert anticipation for the match at the same time as it withholds information about the missing bag. Second, it shows travel as a key aspect of the

work that occurs in the meantime of wrestling events.

Quickly, the video shifts to their arrival in Osaka and a press conference, before it fades to Matt stating that Nick's backpack has been stolen and "they have no idea what they're going to do." Over the following couple minutes, Matt and Nick attempt to work it out: they go to the consulate (it's closed), a police station, and phone Tiger Notori, a referee and office worker at New Japan, who helps foreign talent navigate wrestling in Japan. This is the last time the missing bag and passports are mentioned until after sequences with Omega pre- and post-Dominion. It is left unresolved and as a background contingency to the *BTE* narrative. Although both wrestlers appear calm in these scenes, they seem vulnerable. Their ability to wrestle and travel are in the hands of bureaucratic structures. The episode situates the Omega-Okada II within the precarities of a lost passport, which Nick needs to travel back home and then to Australia in the coming days. We are brought into this uncertain interval in which the wrestlers do not know what will happen, and encounter the work and contingencies that wrestlers experience outside of the ring.

The focus then shifts to directly anticipate the Omega-Okada II match, and draw our interest to the potentialities of the future-past match that is "not-yet-in-the making" (Pape, 2017, p. 124). It puts these contingencies into the background. Approximately four minutes into the episode, the Jacksons and Omega sit in an Osaka McDonald's on the morning of the Dominion match. Colourful wrappers scatter the plastic trays on the table in front of them as they offer remarks about the upcoming match and their performance day preparations to their YouTube audience. Yet, the typical moment of the wrestlers sitting in McDonald's is "infused" with our experience and our anticipation of the match (Pape, 2017, p. 123). Pushing the camera in on Omega's face, Matt opens the conversation: "This man's got a big show. Big match." Like the false finish, the close-up here is a technique for holding potential. As Pape (2019) explains, the

close-up “foregrounds the character’s potential to affect and be affected in an environment of secrecy” (p. 158). Analyzing *Damages,* he argues that in the procedural legal drama, where interactions are about “saving face” and—like wrestling— “working an angle,” sustained close-ups enable the “minutest movement” on the actors’ faces to “effectuate a considerable affective charge” (p.155). In this scene, the affective charge emerges from Omega’s quietness and, perhaps, tentativeness in contrast to the intense and forceful figure in the ring.

Figure 15. Omega describes getting ready for the match. Still from “Dominion Fallout” (Being the Elite, 2017).

Omega’s stillness invites us to search his inscrutable face for clues of how the match will go. Knowing that it will be a sixty-minute draw (even though this is a secret in the scene), we might read his stillness as conserving energy as he prepares. Likewise, the scene’s looseness and closeness invite us to listen carefully alongside the Jacksons and share in Omega’s preparation and anticipation. Looking into the camera, Omega notes that he’s already applied his “first base coat of spray tan.” Matt chimes in “I sprayed your back this morning.” Their comments insert

previously unseen bodily preparations, outside labour (a hair stylist), and cooperative work and care into a trajectory of the match and the draw. We might also begin to wonder about what other procedures they might engage in. What other preparations need to be done so that Omega-Okada II happens? We might begin to wonder about who else was there. What other workers do the work to get the wrestlers into the ring? As such, the *BTE* detour to McDonalds on the way to the future-past match can disperse our attention "across the various heterogeneous elements in a complex relational field to probe how all these elements might feed into the *how* of a process's playing out" (Pape, 2019, p. 166).

As Omega begins to speak about his "pre-match butterflies" the potential *hows* of the match are further emphasized. Still looking in the camera, he explains that "it's not really nerves for the performance. You just wanna get it over with cuz you're excited to show people something." Omega himself is in a state of suspense and uncertainty, and he seems to wear the potential for what the match became on his face. He states, "What we do tonight, is gonna be a lot different. But, I hope that you can all enjoy it." Omega and Okada have worked out and will work out a plan for the match. We might understand that plan as a kind of experiment with the informal and formal elements in the fix of the draw.

In my interview with Premier Championship Wrestling ring announcer "Filthy" Josh Hammerstein, he described watching Omega prepare backstage for a three tag-team match at Omega's hometown Winnipeg indie promotion. Hammerstein highlighted Omega's mind for wrestling, noting, "It's amazing to see… his mind is just above everyone else. He doesn't just remember his parts in a match, he remembers everyone's parts in a match… he went over from beginning to end what they said they would do" (J. Hammerstein, personal communication, 15

February 2021).[24] Hammerstein's description of Omega suggests Omega's awareness of the ways in which he entrusts his body to his opponents. Even if a match will be reworked during the performance and the spaces in between the moves will be filled in, by knowing not only his part, but his opponents' parts, Omega anticipates how he will give his body over to the care of his opponent. By collaborating on and agreeing to a match plan with Okada, he has already engaged in the match's practice of trust and care. As Omega speaks in the Osaka McDonald's, he and Okada have already opened themselves up to each other and are already in the process of mutually becoming vulnerable.[25]

Like the sequences of false finishes towards the end of the Omega-Okada II, the video ramps up in anticipation and intensity as it shifts to backstage at Dominion, as the wrestlers wait in a hallway just behind "gorilla," the backstage space immediately past the curtain.

Figures 16-17. Matt Jackson and Omega prepare backstage moments before Omega-Okada II. Stills from "Dominion Fallout."

The wrestlers' gear, Omega's styled hair, and the music from the pre-match video playing for the 11,000 fans on the other side of the curtain trigger our already seen images of the future-past

[24] Similarly, in a CBC Arts long read, Chris Dart (2021) quotes sports journalist Corey Erdman, who describes watching Omega plan matches while at work on the *Omega Man* documentary. Erdman states: "He's always cognizant of what the story is that he's trying to tell. And having seen him put a match together in real time backstage, he thinks about them basically as a 30-minute television show."

[25] I have a memory of hearing that the Jacksons also helped Omega plan the match. However, I have not been able to find this quote again. If it is true, the Jacksons are further involved in the processes of care and planning in Omega-Okada II.

match.[26] As one commenter on the "Dominion Fallout" YouTube page, who has presumably watched the match, writes, "Kenny Omega prepping for his match while the promo package played in the backround [sic] gave me nerves" (Being The Elite, 2017). Omega's previously noted butterflies feel more pronounced. Shooting Matt and Omega, Nick asks "You ready to rock?" from off-camera. Omega glances towards Nick with a slight smile and responds, "Ready to go to hell and back." Nick replies with a matter-of-fact "Yep" and "You've got this." Then, as Matt shows off their new gear for the camera, Omega walks to the stairs and does push-ups to enhance his already muscular body. In this sequence, Omega appears in transition from the tentative Omega we saw earlier and the explosive athlete about to come in the match.[27] He is no longer still, in close-up. Instead, he paces the hallway. There is the sense that Omega-Okada II is about to happen, is already happening.

On *BTE* we do not encounter the match. Instead we are led to activate it in our mind as the video cross-fades to "two hours later," an hour after the match's completion. Matt again films as Omega sits shirtless with bare legs on a blue cushioned bench. An ice bag is latched onto his back. Sweat glistens on his skin; his voice is barely audible. Again, we need to listen closely and carefully. The image reflects the collapsed wrestlers on the ring mat an hour ago. Omega appears physically drained.

[26] Yet, it is also the missing images backstage that drive the intensity. Okada is not present. However, knowing that he will enter the ring from the same entrance mere minutes after Omega indicates that he must be nearby. He is perhaps just behind Nick as he films. Okada's absence here preserves the excitement and the feelings of realness in the image of Omega and Okada meeting each other in the ring again, the image that opened this chapter. The wrestlers protect the feud narrative and the business, even while exposing it. In so doing, anticipation and the sensations that something is about to happen is heightened.

[27] Omega's body is also in transition. He will put on a noticeable amount of muscle by his belt win at Omega-Okada IV.

Figure 18. Nick Jackson shows Omega GIFs of the match backstage after Omega-Okada II. Still from “Dominion Fallout” (2017).

At the same time, the scene offers a backstage moment of working loose and care between The Elite wrestlers. The deep story of labour, perhaps, patterns this work outside the ring. Moreover, the match’s potentialities and uncertainties continue to be reinvigorated in the scene by the wrestlers. Nick leans over Omega, holding out his phone, and scrolling through match GIFs. Like fans looking to distinguish the real from the performed, Omega and the Jacksons analyze his performance, moving tentatively through each GIF. Although it is difficult to see, they appear to review the top-rope moonsault described earlier in this chapter. Just like the delayed moment of the false finish, the repetitive brief interval of the GIF asks us and the wrestlers to think through how the move plays out. Matt, off camera, confesses that he “got freaked out” by Omega’s moonsault, reflecting the care and concern expressed by the audience as Omega’s legs wobbled on the ropes. His comment suggests that he held the potential of Omega falling in his mind. Kenny replies that he can’t believe he did it. Perhaps, he felt that potential as well.

Watching another clip, Omega comments that "I think I really smoked [Okada] on that one." He sounds disappointed at the mistake. Their careful review points to the ways that mistakes, real hits, and pain are potentially part of every wrestling match; how expectation can include the unexpected (Pape, 2019, p. 166). Moreover, the GIFs and the wrestlers' engagement with them activate the potentialities and emphasize the contingencies within Omega and Okada's planned out moves and pre-determined match. Despite the planning and care, there was no guarantee that the match would come out the way they hoped. Moreover, the scenes of a contemplative and exhausted Omega before and after Omega-Okada II inscribe the match with a bodily cost that invigorates the feelings of realness.

In its conclusion, *BTE* returns to the episode's opening image—another pre-empted ending in the ongoing interval of pro-wrestling—to increase audience concern about the precarities wrestlers experience while doing wrestling work. It's clear now that Nick and Matt stand in a California airport parking lot, only just realizing that the keys to Nick's car were in the stolen backpack. They are stranded. Nick declares, "This nightmare will not end" and the closing "like, comment, subscribe" sequence, which features links to the wrestlers' Pro Wrestling Tees stores and personal websites to purchase merchandise, concludes the episode. Just like the Omega-Okada feud continues, the stolen backpack saga remains suspended and ongoing. However, the YouTube video seeks to direct the audience's interest in the ongoing narrative and their concern not only to the wrestlers' next video and match, but to express their caring investment by supporting the wrestlers through digital likes and merch purchases. They invite us to continue investing in the *BTE* narrative, the Omega-Okada angle, and to perhaps play a role in it ourselves by replacing the lost two thousand dollars with t-shirt purchases. We are invited to remain in suspension, in the "something happening."

An Intimate Public

It is in this something happening that pro wrestling's intimate public emerges and is shaped through its structure of feeling. Evidence of the intimate public and its experiences of realness and suspense can be seen in the online responses to the *BTE* episode. Since its upload in 2017, "Dominion Fallout" has garnered over 221,000 views, 6700 likes, and 592 comments. The comments largely cluster around two main themes: the stolen backpack and the match. Many comments regarding the backpack offer possible culprits, wrestlers and participants that have feud histories with the Jacksons and Omega. They offer kayfabe storylines to contextualize the real-life event. One commentator consoles, "You had to sacrifice the bag to that Omega-Okada match. Sorry Nick." Conversely, comments focused on Omega-Okada II centre on the match's physicality and performance and the lived experience of watching it. They attend to the realness. One comment reads: "The genuine storytelling and nerve-wracking tension made it such an emotional match when it was over. I enjoyed it so much I was left entirely drained." Realness and suspense texture the comment feed and shape the ongoing connections between audience members and the wrestling texts. As Zizi Papacharissi (2015) explains, structures of feeling are "soft structures [that] form the texture of online expression and connection" (p. 115). The audience responses not only attest to the affectivity of the match itself, — another commenter notes that the "match was emotionally draining to watch"— but offer demonstrations of ongoing emotional effects.

The participants' descriptions emphasize the importance of both Omega's aesthetic and narrative performance, and Omega's labour and person. They offer affective responses to Omega and *BTE*. Significantly, one commentator explicitly identifies how the after-the-match scenes contributed to his experience and understanding of the Omega-Okada II match. They write:

"This made me appreciate the pure physical toll that wrestling has on the body. Kenny looks absolutely spent after that match. Props to the Elite, the best in the business, no one could do what y'all do." Similarly, in the anonymous 2020-2021 online survey I facilitated for this project, nineteen of ninety-nine respondents identified Omega as one of their favourite wrestlers. One participant identified Omega as their favourite because he is an "incredible athlete and storyteller." Respondents noted his "sheer athleticism and excellent storytelling" and "attention to detail and long-term story telling" as reasons they liked him. Another participant shared that he "got into him because he's from my hometown, stayed because he's the best story teller I've ever seen."[28] We see evidence of how pro wrestling's deep stories about performance and labour direct the ongoing affective experiences of pro wrestling's non-wrestler participants. Participants are drawn to the dynamics of the bodily work and narrative performance that occur in the tensions between the fix-making and the unexpected happenings. Across their comments we can see affective attachments forming between fans, wrestlers, wrestling matches, and other texts away from the wrestling ring. Fans like each other's comments, suggesting shared feelings around care for the wrestlers and the stories they tell. These "affective gestures" "constitute opportunities to call networked publics [and intimate publics] into being" (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 24), where "emotion and feeling" can begin to "define modalities of belonging" (p. 117). Although the comments demonstrate loose connections, they express a shared feeling of suspense experienced in the match and *BTE* and an investment in supporting Omega and the Jacksons beyond cheering during a match.[29]

[28] Seven of the respondents who identified Omega as a favourite wrestler were from Manitoba, and it's possible that hometown pride played into more than one response.

Conclusion

By analyzing the Omega-Okada II match, its finishers, and kayfabe I've identified how pro wrestling's entangled intervals of suspense form the affective and generic rigging of the industry and culture. This rigging conditions participants' orientations and experiences and enables an intimate public to form around pro wrestling's texts and management of time. My investigation demonstrates how the tensions between pro wrestling's predetermined fixes and the contingencies of how such fixes play out through the practices of labour and performance generate a continued and shared sense of something happening. I identify how pro wrestling produces ongoing investments from audiences, wrestlers, and other participants by operating from an ethic of tentativeness and care. These divergent investments include bodily and mediated labour of wrestlers, and the monetary and affective investments of audience members. By thinking with pro wrestling conventions, this chapter sets the stage to analyze "what kinds and qualities of movements" the pro wrestling industry and culture affords (Pape, 2019, p. 167-169).

In the following chapters, I extend my own practice of tentative attention by engaging questions that arise from thinking and feeling with pro wrestling's liminal genre and its interval of suspense. If pro wrestling is worked out in the in-between, as we have seen in this chapter, what are the industry and cultural practices that take place in the ongoing interval? How do kayfabe's inherent tensions between potentialities and the structured ways of working inform industry practices? In particular, how are wrestling's predetermined in-ring fixes (over)determined? How might they be changed? How does kayfabe exert pressures and set limits on bookings or hiring? How does the dominant history and conventions of pro wrestling as a largely white, seemingly straight, masculine industry shape the ways that kayfabe is experienced as feelings of realness? How does it affect those who do not share the same positionalities? How

does it shape the intimate publics that form around wrestling and where and to whom financial and affective investment from fans and the industry is directed? What comes into view when we examine with engaged uncertainty, tentatively and carefully, the work outside the ring? Who might we begin to see at work? How might we expand our ethic of attentiveness and what forms of tentativeness and care might we find outside the ring?

Chapter 2

Shooting: "Authenticity Work" and Branding Realness

In the months before and after their self-promoted September 2018 pay-per-view event All In, "The Elite" wrestlers, particularly Cody Rhodes and Matt and Nick Jackson, appeared on popular pro wrestling podcasts and media, and their YouTube show *Being the Elite*. The wrestlers repeated phrases about "sticking together" and building a "wrestling revolution." Pro wrestling "dirt sheets" —websites, newsletters, and other media that cover wrestling news and rumours—reported not only the PPV's matches and outcomes, but the wrestlers' post-PPV speeches and their interview comments (Barrasso, 2018). On Twitter, Reddit, and the *BTE* comments section, fans debated the meaning of The Elite's proclamations and their hints about their future plans. Over the following months, the wrestlers' talk about their collaborative work, the family-like connection they feel with fans, and their desire to change the wrestling business became key themes for building and branding their new company All Elite Wrestling as a more loving and real alternative to WWE.[30]

Pro wrestling may be a "spectacle of excess" where the body acts as a "basic sign" and is "endowed with an absolute clarity" (Barthes, 2005, pp. 23–25). Yet, The Elite's podcast interviews and the wrestling media's and fans' interest in what they said point us to Claire Warden's (2017) astute claim that the "readily accepted images of professional wrestling" as solely body-centred "obscure the vital importance of the speech act" in pro wrestling performances and its media industry more broadly (p. 17). As Warden notes, "textual interventions are rarely theorized and often seem disconnected from the physical excess that defines the spectacle of professional wrestling" (p. 17). Following Judith Butler, Warden (2017)

[30] All Elite Wrestling launched in January 2019 after Rhodes and the Jacksons' New Japan contracts expired.

explains that “speech acts and bodily actions are inextricably tied together”; speech and language do not only describe situations in pro wrestling, rather, speech is “a dynamic system of action” (p. 17, 18). In the ring, wrestlers call moves to cue their opponent, and although they attempt to hide such calls in whispers from behind a curtain of wet hair, cameras and microphones sometimes pick up these brief communications. “Promos,” pro wrestling dialogues or monologues, like Omega’s promo prior to Omega-Okada II discussed last chapter, emphasize a wrestler’s gimmick, further storylines, and promote upcoming matches. Those wrestlers known for their verbal expressivity are praised for “being good on the mic.” Talk does a lot of work in pro wrestling.

This chapter turns to “shoot interview podcasts”—in which wrestlers appear out of gimmick or character and seem to reveal real life stories and backstage happenings—to examine how the dynamics of talk fuel the industry by energizing fan and others’ ongoing investment in the broader space of wrestling discourse. As the industry has become increasingly mediated in spaces away from the ring, to be good on the mic could now also mean being a good podcast host, or, like The Elite, having a talked-about promo or podcast appearance. Beginning largely in the 1990s and early 2000s, wrestlers appeared seemingly out of character on talk shows or gave “shoot interviews” with dirt sheet writers to promote matches, and to discuss creative decisions, booking, and management. A “shoot,” the counterpoint to a “work” in pro wrestling slang, refers to “something that is real and not fixed” or scripted, as in, to be a “straight shooter” (Chow, 2014, p. 74). Shoot interviews promise glimpses of the real behind and within the work, and attest to the legitimacy of wrestlers and wrestling. The convergence of a growing podcast industry, a thriving indie wrestling scene, and a new major American wrestling promotion, All Elite Wrestling, has seen the shoot interview podcast become a ubiquitous media form within the

industry.

In this chapter I examine how wrestlers engage in "shoot talk" on popular pro wrestling podcasts, such as *Talk is Jericho, AEW Unrestricted,* and *The Sessions,* and examine how narratives of work and sensations of realness, intimacy, and togetherness exist within these broader performance and work practices. I consider how these media texts, whose promoters and wrestlers perform in ways that brand realness and draw audiences' affective and economic investment, do forms of "authenticity work" (Berg, 2021). My investigation draws on Mia Consalvo and Christopher A. Paul's (2019) analysis of how real video games are discursively constructed through appeals to a game developer's industry pedigree, the game's construction and play, and the money trail produced by the game. I demonstrate how professional wrestlers use shoot interviews to tell personal stories that engage key discursive frames and citation patterns around pedigree, work, income, and feeling to shape and conventionalize accounts of who and what a real professional wrestler is. I argue that while the production of realness can be used to produce industry status and opportunities, it also maintains hierarchical structures that limit opportunities for marginalized wrestlers.

I begin my investigation by illustrating how Cody Rhodes and Matt and Nick Jackson use shoot talk to brand themselves and All Elite Wrestling. They position their work and AEW as both a labour of love that is more authentic than WWE, and a real, big-league alternative to the industry-dominating company. I then dig into an analysis of the personal stories that pro wrestlers joining AEW tell on shoot interview podcasts. I argue that new AEW wrestlers tell particular kinds of stories to demonstrate their wrestling authenticity away from the WWE, the corporation that has largely defined dominant conceptions of the wrestling genre and success in North America. At the same time, they demonstrate their fit in the new company.

My analysis then turns to an examination of how marginalized wrestlers navigate pro wrestling's citational norms in their shoot talk, performing precarious, representational, and educational authenticity work to make themselves legible as professional wrestlers within the industry's affective and labour structures. Because pro wrestling has largely been shaped and controlled by white, hyper-masculine wrestlers, the dominant stories that get told about pro wrestling perpetuate white patriarchal power in the industry and constrain what is imagined possible for other wrestlers and other kinds of wrestling. Building on Mark Fisher's (2009) concept of "capitalist realism," pro wrestling's deep stories about realness contribute to the construction of "kayfabe realism," "a pervasive *atmosphere*," ontology, or "widespread sense" that designates already-established labour and performance practices of wrestlers who fit the dominant norm—hypermasculine and largely white, straight cismen—as "best for business" and render it near "impossible even to *imagine*… coherent alternative[s]" within mainstream wrestling (p. 2). In shoot interview podcasts, wrestlers and promoters normalize industry hierarchies. Their stories rely on memories of past events and they direct feelings of realness in the present and the future. In the process, shoot talk shapes how wrestlers, wrestling stories, matches, and intimate publics "are brought into being" in ways that have exclusionary effects (Consalvo & Paul, 2019, p. xxxiv).

History of Shooting and Shoot Talk

Shoot talk and shoot interviews have long shaped notions of legitimacy in the pro wrestling industry. The act of "shooting," or performing a real act in or out of a match, has an even longer history. During early territory eras, wrestling promotions often chose "shooters" or "hookers," trained competitive wrestlers or fighters, to be their champions; "hookers or shooters or enforcers existed… in order to enact real violence, shoring up the fictional narrative (see

Thesz)" (Fontaine et al, 2022, p. 4). As a legitimate fighter, a shooter could, in theory, defeat an opponent who refused to follow the match's scripted finish, or beat a drunk fan looking to prove wrestling's fakeness in a bar brawl after the show. Laine (2019a) explains that promotions expected challenges to their legitimacy; "The shooters were supposed to be able to best any challenger and keep the audience (or 'marks') believing, paying for, and betting on performances… So while kayfabe was and continues to be maintained through more theatrical methods, for some time it was physically enforced" (p. 28). Shooting "protected the business" by attesting to the realness of the champion and maintaining the audience's investment in the champion.

Shoot interviews, by contrast, are largely understood as a practice that exposes the business by revealing real backstage events. In 1997 pro wrestling star Bret Hart, who looms large in this chapter as a figure of realness, appeared in the wake of the "Montreal Screwjob" on the Canadian sports talk show *Off the Record with Michael Landsberg.*

Figure 19. Still of Bret Hart giving a shoot interview on *Off the Record with Michael Landsberg* (MerMoose Media, 2021).

He discussed the infamous unscripted finish of his PPV match with Shawn Michaels the previous month. In the shoot interview, Hart appeared candid as he described a sense of betrayal and anger that he felt from experiencing the breakdown of pro wrestling's industry ethics and practices, which rely on trust and the agreed-upon finish. Hart laid out the broken agreements and contract issues with WWF CEO Vince McMahon that surrounded the match, which, as the story goes, saw referee Earl Hebner declare Michaels the winner and new WWF Champion, on McMahon's orders, even though Hart never submitted to Michaels in the match. McMahon, according to Hart, had previously agreed to a different finish, which would allow him to remain champion at the Canadian PPV event and relinquish the title on the following WWF television broadcast. Hart reluctantly "exposed the business" because of the ways in which kayfabe's contract had already been broken during the match. Days after the interview, when Hart debuted on WWF's competition World Championship Wrestling, the Screwjob and Hart's interview was in viewers' minds.

This event and surrounding interviews ushered in an era in which fans have become increasingly interested in wrestling's backstage events. Over twenty years later, fans, journalists, wrestlers, and industry workers, including Hart and others who are said to have been involved in the Screwjob, have used podcasts as spaces to discuss their feelings and ongoing debates about what was real and what was not in the Screwjob.[31] By returning to old matters, they extend in-ring narratives, offer hot takes, and praise events, promotions, and individuals in the industry. In this sense, shoot talk, like shooters fighting in bars, is actually about maintaining the legitimacy of the industry. They shape what feels real in pro wrestling and cultivate the audience's affective

[31] See episodes from: Mick Foley's *Foley is Pod* (2022); Bruce Prichard's *Something to Wrestle* (2022); and Chris Jericho's *Talk is Jericho* (2018a).

and economic investment in those feelings of realness.

Shoot Interview Podcasts

Shoot talk and shoot interview podcasts beyond the match and the ring maintain the sense that pro wrestling is always-already-ongoing. They draw participant attention and sustain their investment in wrestling's stories between matches and their television broadcasts. For many listeners, pro wrestling podcasts are part of their everyday experience of pro wrestling's subculture. In my 2020 survey of pro wrestling participants' media and cultural practices, approximately eighty-seven percent of respondents indicated that they listened to one or more wrestling podcasts on a regular basis. One survey respondent noted that when COVID19 saw indie promotions cancel events and AEW and WWE broadcast without live crowds in the arena, they listened to more wrestling podcasts.

Not surprisingly, podcasts hosted by already established wrestling figures, such as current or former AEW or WWE workers, have the highest reach and influence. These podcasts are some of the most popular wrestling podcasts on Apple, Spotify, and also in my survey results.[32] They include: *Talk is Jericho* (2013 - present), *The Steve Austin Show* (2013 - 2020), *AEW Unrestricted* (2020 - present), and *The Art of Wrestling* (2010 - present). However, wrestling participants also listen to various fan, amateur, and smaller production podcasts. My survey listed twenty-three pro wrestling podcasts that respondents could choose as podcasts they listened to, including the podcasts listed above and smaller podcasts, such as, *Marty and Sarah Love Wrestling* (2016 - present) and *Tights and Fights* (2016 - present). Only one listed podcast did not garner any response on the survey (*Smark to Death*). Further, respondents wrote in over

[32] Since completing my survey, Renee Paquette, who had been a broadcaster with WWE, left the company and started *The Sessions* (2020 - present) podcast. Although not always listed with the top podcasts on Spotify, Paquette's interviews are often picked up and reported on by dirt sheets. She also happens to be married to AEW wrestler Jon Moxley and is now an on-screen reporter with AEW.

thirty additional podcasts in their responses to the question. This suggests that pro wrestling podcasts are key sites where participants talk about wrestling and about the industry. These mediatized personal conversations about wrestling play a role in shaping its culture.

Shoot interview podcasts bring new nuances to the meaning of "shoot" and act as a new technology that engages the real to bolster "the work" or the theatrical, and at the same time promote performers and the industry more broadly. The generic expectations of "intimacy and authenticity" (McHugh, 2018, p. 105) in long conversational interview podcasts intersect with pro wrestling's cultural expectations that a shoot interview will reveal the real behind the work. Podcasts can be produced with limited equipment and experience, and outside of a recording studio. Further, as Kathleen Collins (2018) suggests, "the physical aspects of audio, enhanced further by the use of earbuds or headphones, and the feeling of a one-to-one relationship with the speaker(s)" produces a state of intimacy (p. 228). Pro wrestling's podcasts construct an intimacy that gets at the heart of pro wrestling's structure of feelings around what "feels real" (McGregor, 2022, p. 92).

Podcasting's codes of intimacy and authenticity are often tied to its amateur roots and mode of delivery (Euritt and Korfmacher, 2021, p. 6). Wrestler Colt Cabana's *The Art of Wrestling* constructs intimacy and authenticity by making reference to friendships among the podcast's participants and situating that friendship within a semi-private space, the wrestlers' locker room (Euritt and Korfmacher, 2021, p. 3). Cabana's podcast is largely identified as starting the pro wrestling podcast boom (Silverio, 2023). On a 2012 appearance on comedian Marc Maron's *WTF* podcast, Cabana, who was an indie wrestler at the time and now works for AEW, describes how he "[fell] in love with podcasts" while on the road between indie bookings. His discussion with Maron demonstrates how *The Art of Wrestling* engages podcasting and pro

wrestling's "cultural codes of intimacy" (Euritt and Korfmacher, 2021, p. 3) to give audiences a sense of being with the wrestlers in between matches:

> It clicked to me what a tool this is. But also, I found myself having conversations like your podcast in the locker room… I wanted to take the awesome conversations that we've had, half-naked, sweaty, you know, everyone's hurting and nobody expects these conversations out of us. These are some of the greatest memories in my career, and I thought what a treat for people outside of the locker room to have. And then when I started listening to yours, I saw, almost not as a science, but just the beauty of the art of the conversation (Cabana on Maron, 2012, 21:50 - 24:05).[33]

The locker room functions as an intimate space— often where "boys can be boys." In sports and masculine discourse, it signals intimacy and authenticity to the audience by promising a glimpse behind the theatrical curtain. Listeners might get to hear about what really happened in a match or hear a wrestler "shoot" on another wrestler or promoter.[34] They might be let into the business, into a place where industry and personal secrets are told. Cabana's and other shoot interview podcasts have expectations of "truth-telling and personal revelation [as their] basic elements" (K. Collins, 2018, p. 238). In his discussion with Maron, Cabana emphasizes his podcast's sense of intimacy by describing the wrestlers' sweating and naked bodies. In Cabana's and other shoot interview podcasts, industry workers (including wrestlers, commentators, and referees) interview other workers. As a result, the shoot interview podcast, like other long form interview or conversational podcasts, has the affective qualities of a personal "shoot the shit"-

[33] Maron opens the episode by discussing Roland Barthes' "The World of Wrestling" and the relationships between comedy and pro wrestling via Andy Kaufman.

[34] Many shoot interviews also feature stories of bad behaviour. While some are mild and involve pranks or "harmless ribs," some stories, particularly older shoot interviews have involved stories of abuse. Many of these have been featured prominently on the Vice documentary series *Dark Side of the Ring.*

type conversation between peers that lacks "a standard PR-driven gloss" (K. Collins, 2018, p. 237).

At the same time that shoot interview podcasts, such as *The Art of Wrestling,* produce intimacy, their mediatized conversations also provide a vehicle for professional promotion. Cabana began *The Art of Wrestling* from his Chicago "studio… apartment" (as he declares in opening monologues) after being fired by WWE in the wake of lacklustre run with the company. Listening to Maron's podcast, he was inspired by how Maron seemed to use *WTF* to reinvigorate his career. Cabana realized that a podcast of his own could supplement his indie match pay by providing an additional income stream and promoting his merchandise. The podcasts are, as Cabana notes to Maron, "a tool" for promotion for both the host and their interviewees. As common practice on many podcasts, shoot interview podcast hosts direct listeners to their websites, available merchandise, and upcoming appearances, and they provide their interviewees with the same platform. These advertisements are sometimes tacked on or incorporated into their conversation and therefore share in the affective qualities of intimacy and authenticity. By engaging in personal and revealing conversations on shoot interview podcasts, professional wrestlers perform "authenticity work" (Berg, 2021) that produces social, cultural and economic capital that can be leveraged for professional opportunity, income, and prestige (p. 94). Their conversations enable wrestlers to establish themselves as a kind of (straight) shooter— a *real* professional wrestler.

Branding the Elite and AEW

Across shoot interview podcast appearances, The Elite wrestlers, particularly Matt and Nick Jackson and Cody Rhodes, tell stories around work and fan relationships to brand themselves as real pro wrestlers leading a wrestling revolution. Their conversations draw on two

subcultural discourses of wrestler authenticity to give their acts deeper meaning: authenticity associated with collaboration and community in indie wrestling, and authenticity demonstrated by getting over with an audience, filling arenas, and selling merchandise. On shoot interview podcasts, they use these authenticity frames to distinguish themselves from WWE wrestlers by highlighting their individual creative and financial autonomy away from WWE's corporate and bureaucratic structure. They challenge public perceptions that position WWE wrestlers as the most real and successful wrestlers in the industry. In so doing, they set an affective and economic rigging on which to brand their self-produced PPV and later All Elite Wrestling as real and a revolutionary alternative to WWE.

The Elite—the Jacksons and Omega, and later Rhodes—first began constructing their brand in 2016 on their YouTube series *Being the Elite* by documenting and narrating their day-to-day lives as wrestlers working for New Japan, Ring of Honor, and indie promotions. The series taps into how "the necessity, value, and love of working" is deeply entrenched in pro wrestling culture (Fontaine, 2022, p. 294). As described last chapter, *BTE* reveals real-life intimate moments, such as the shared meal between friends prior to the Omega-Okada II match and the Jacksons caring for a worn-out Omega in the aftermath. Overall, the ongoing series depicts the self-proclaimed "Elite" wrestlers engaged in an ongoing grind of wrestling work in and out of the ring. Professional wrestling grew out of a practice of fixing the outcomes of matches and shares the language of the con. A performance was a "work" meant to free the crowd of "marks" from their money. As a result of this history, pro wrestling slang, talk, and social practices are "writ through with the language of work" (Laine, 2019a, p.126), and reveal the ways in which work is still "acknowledged and valued" (Chow, 2014, p. 74). Chow (2014) outlines: "wrestlers are not called 'wrestlers,' but 'workers.' One 'works,' that is, attacks, a

specific body part. One ‘works the crowd,’ ‘selling’ the staged violence as real” (p. 74). Even as wrestlers and fans both acknowledge that the fix is in, stories and values of working, such as those The Elite tell, continue to shape the industry.

The Elite’s brand centres on work, embedding narratives of hustling or grinding and the “labour of love,” which have also emerged as orientations in the industry, in their performances (Fontaine, 2022). Their depictions of work have expanded what constitutes work in professional wrestling. On *BTE,* The Elite are always working in and for pro wrestling. Fans watched as The Elite made their way outside of the dominant WWE system and wrestled matches, folded t-shirts, and signed autographs. They listened as The Elite described their pain, injuries, and exhaustion and as the wrestlers verbally reminded viewers that they were doing it all for the “business that we love” (Dick, 2016; Fontaine, 2022, p. 294). As I (2022) have argued elsewhere, The Elite constructed what Alison Hearn (2008) calls a “branded ‘self’”—“an entity that works and, at the same time, points to itself working, striving to embody the values of its working environment” and “generate[s] its own rhetorically persuasive packaging, its own promotional skin within the confines of the dominant corporate [or cultural] imaginary” (p. 68). A branded self demonstrates “how to live a perpetually productive life” (p. 61). The Elite integrated the love of working into their onscreen stories and merchandise. Rhodes, who joined The Elite a few months into *BTE* after leaving WWE, “adopted the phrase ‘Do the Work’ as a mantra” and wore it on a weight belt (Rhodes [@CodyRhodes], 2018; Fontaine, 2022, p. 295). The Jacksons “re-appropriated the term ‘killing the business’—slapped it on their wrestling gear and t-shirts—branding how they were ‘killing it’ outside of WWE” (Pratt, 2018; Fontaine, 2022, p. 295). A purchase from their merchandise website YoungBucksMerch.com would reveal in the PayPal transaction that they had incorporated their merchandise company as Killing The Business Inc. As such, *BTE* archives

The Elite's work record and shows their work as driven by passion for pro wrestling, and shared goals and friendships with each other.

On The Elite's podcast appearances on *Talk is Jericho,* before and after their self-produced pay-per-view All In, which took place in Chicago's Sears Arena on September 1, 2018, their stories build on their *BTE* performances to show their work as being different than work in WWE, because it is both creatively and financially rewarding for them as wrestlers.[35] The Jacksons and Rhodes narrate the work that pro wrestling participants have been watching them perform on *BTE* and at live events. On "All In with Cody and The Young Bucks," Jericho, who had worked for WWE for approximately twenty years, sets up a conversation about WWE's creative control over wrestlers that enables The Elite to differentiate themselves from WWE wrestlers by situating their realness as rooted in the DIY hustle they've already exhibited on *BTE* (Jericho, 2018c). Describing fighting for the creative ideas he wanted to use at WWE, Jericho states, "It's hard to have to give up that final cut… but if you work in WWE that's the price you pay" (Jericho, 2018c, 48:30). In response, Matt Jackson suggests that it's been their creative independence that has enabled them to get over with wrestling audiences. He explains: "We're DIY from the ground up. We've made every decision on our own. We've built ourselves up to this empire now, on our own… How can I hand over the keys to this car to someone at this point" (M. Jackson on Jericho, 2018c). Jackson's statement suggests that WWE holds back wrestlers. His response reflects common creative industries narratives that "position labor and love as productive partners" (Duffy, 2019, p. 61). The loss of creative control is too high of a

[35] Responding unprompted the prior year to a Twitter conversation in which *Wrestling Observer* journalist Dave Meltzer stated that an independent wrestling promotion could not sell out ten thousand seats in North America, Rhodes quote-tweeted: "I'll take that bet Dave" (Rhodes [@codyrhodes], 2017). He then began producing All In with Matt and Nick Jackson. In the months and days leading up to All In and then following the event, Rhodes and the Jacksons, made multiple appearances on popular pro wrestler Chris Jericho's podcast *Talk is Jericho* and described the process of booking the venues, talent, and matches, and promoting it through Easter eggs and comedy bits on *BTE,* advertisements on their social media accounts, and shoot interviews.

personal and economic cost, because working from a sense of love for professional wrestling has been what has enabled them to build their empire. Moreover, the use of the term "empire" stands up against the WWE's universe branding. While an empire may not be as vast as the universe, it signifies The Elite's wealth and control over themselves, and perhaps, their growing influence on the industry.

Further, their DIY discourse intersects with indie wrestling discourse that depicts indie wrestling as "more community-based and authentic" and thus more desirable than WWE's corporate wrestling (R. T. Smith, 2014 p. 10). Indie events are "labors of love shared among performers and their audience" (Pratt, 2019, p. 156), where wrestlers and trainees typically set up the ring while volunteers usually work merch and ticket tables for free entrance to the show. As Kate Bundy, who helped start the feminist wrestling collective South Eastern Women's Wrestling in Athens, Georgia, put it to me, "With an indie promotion you just roll up your sleeves and get into whatever you need to get into" (K. Bundy, personal communication, February 5, 2021). On *Talk is Jericho*, Nick Jackson emphasizes All In as the product of their collaborative work: "For *shoot*, we need three thumbs up for everything" and "all did leg work" (emphasis added, N. Jackson on Jericho, 2018c, 28:44).[36] Moreover, the interview and podcast's construction emphasize this collectivity by giving the listener the feeling of eavesdropping or listening into a familiar conversation between co-workers or friends in a semi-private space. As they offer comments to Jericho, the Jacksons and Rhodes' voices come in over each other, sometimes interrupting and sometimes sounding like a round chorus, echoing each other. Their interruptions read as shared excitement around producing All In within the intimate setting of the

[36] Rhodes also describes how Dana Massie, who runs The Young Bucks "merch empire" out of her home with husband Matt, takes care of all the technical details that he and the Jacksons forget when they come up with creative ideas for *All In*. The invocation of Massie's labour links notions of the family and personal intimacy to their work. YoungBucksMerch.com and *All In* are familial and collective endeavors.

podcast.

As they set themselves apart from WWE by emphasizing their collective and loving labour, The Elite show their work model as desirable to other professional wrestlers, putting themselves on par with WWE when it comes to economic and cultural standing. Matt states, "People want to get to where we are… we never had to go there" (M. Jackson on Jericho, 2018c, 49:05). In Matt Jackson's narrative, a WWE contract is no longer the "endgame" or ultimate goal for pro wrestlers. Instead, their talk identifies their independent work as an appealing alternative to the WWE for wrestlers. At the same time, it sets them apart as distinctly successful because they were able to sell-out a 10,000-seat event without ever having gone to WWE. Wrestlers want to get where they are at, but they are not yet where The Elite are.

However, on a *Talk is Jericho* appearance following the success of All In, The Elite's recounting of the event suggests that they can bring other wrestlers along with them. Rhodes emphasizes how the independent wrestlers they booked on their show valued and appreciated being part of the event. Rhodes recalls: "It felt so damn good… I saw talent going out while the confetti was flying at the end, just taking pictures of themselves in front of the fans, while we were in the ring. That was the most touching thing. Wrestlers are the biggest marks of all. If it pops us, we know it pops you guys. We're way bigger marks" (Rhodes on Jericho, 2018e, 52:48). His recollection of "popping the boys" is significant because it indicates that the work that The Elite did in creating All In was not just for them. The Elite wanted to "pop" other independent wrestlers. They wanted them to feel the excitement and experience their success alongside them. By showing work outside of the WWE as a viable and desirable option for pro wrestlers, they signal to the audience, including other wrestlers, an alternative career pathway for wrestlers that is, perhaps, a more authentic form of the performance genre than what is currently

produced at WWE. They imply that they have changed how the industry operates.[37] They have, perhaps, as they declared at All In, started a revolution by producing wrestling that is a labour of love, fills the arena, and "pops the boys." In The Elite brand culture, as in all brand cultures, "economic imperatives and 'authenticity' are expressed and experienced simultaneously" (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 5) through what is said and felt.

As The Elite tell these stories, they give the sense of a growing movement around them, including wrestlers and fans, all working for and desiring a new kind of professional wrestling. During this post-All In appearance, the intersections of discourses on collectivity and the podcast's constructions of intimacy and togetherness show fans as essential to The Elite's work, adding to the feelings of a wrestling movement at work. Their post-All In appearance on *Talk is Jericho* was recorded live in front of an audience on Jericho's wrestling themed Caribbean cruise, the "Jericruise." The sound and presence of fans cheering in response to The Elite's statements interpolate the listener as co-creator of All In and The Elite brand. The inclusion of a live audience in the podcast extends the sensations of intimacy from a conversation between friends and co-workers to the fans who are present. This process has multiple effects. First, they act as proxies for those listening at home, just as the in-house fans act as affective proxies for the at-home audience during wrestling matches. The Elite stoke emotional responses from the audience in the podcast as they do during matches and in-ring promos. The audience's presence creates excitement not generally present during backstage shoot interview podcasts, and also attests that what The Elite have to say is worth listening to and caring about (Brunette & Young, 2019, p. 223).

[37] The Elite also sold merchandise with the phrase "The Elite Change the World," alluding to the way they see themselves as changing how pro wrestling operates.

Figures 20-21. Stills from *Being the Elite* "Sail Away, Man – Being The Elite Ep. 124" of the audience and The Elite during the recording of *Talk is Jericho* on the Jericruise (Being the Elite, 2018a).

Second, on the Jericruise podcast the wrestlers tell personal stories like they do during backstage shoot interviews. Only now, they no longer just speak directly to Jericho, but to the fans present, bringing them into the conversation. Reflecting on All In, Matt speaks directly to fans:

> It felt like a big old family reunion, cuz, I mean, I've met most of you at this point, the thousands of meet and greets we've done. And I recognized a lot of you and I've taken pictures with a lot of you. And you guys buy dozens of our t-shirts, so it's more than just a fanbase at this point. I swear it, it feels like a connection, a real, real connection… It's something bigger. It's become a movement (M. Jackson on Jericho, 2018e, 55:44).

Matt's use of "you" and his description includes those fans physically present at All In or the Jericruise, and those listening at home into the podcast, into the conversation, and into The Elite brand. He "build[s] a brand," as Banet-Weiser (2012) explains, by "building an affective authentic *relationship* with a consumer, one based… on the accumulation of memories, emotions, personal narratives, and expectations" (p. 8). The Elite talk to and about their fans in the podcast's conversation between friends. They are all framed as co-workers intimately involved in creating All In.

Talking to fans as intimates also enrols podcast listeners in the promotional logics of upcoming wrestling events and storylines. Their talk aims to build fan excitement and collective anticipation. As Rhodes states on the podcast, "This is a revolution, guys. And each and everyone one of you are part of it" (Jericho, 2018e, 57:07). Both Matt Jackson and Rhodes draw out and draw attention to shared feelings and desires between The Elite and the crowd. As such, "The Elite" brand story, as Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) explains in regards to all brands, provides "a setting" around which wrestlers and fans can "weave their own stories" and share in The Elite's family, work, and desires. Thus, they can experience and celebrate The Elite's industry success alongside them as co-creators of a wrestling movement and later All Elite Wrestling (p. 4). In the lead-up to All In, fans used the phrase and hashtag "I'm All In" to tell The Elite and other pro wrestling participants that they were going to the event or watching the PPV. They weaved their own story of togetherness around The Elite's brand. They are in The Elite. Towards the end of their post-All In *Talk is Jericho* episode, Jericho sets up The Elite to hint towards their future and invite fans to "stick together" with them. He states, "You guys have said it over and over again. You're sticking together. You're going to go be together… Is it real?" (58:05). To me, it is unclear who answers. While the voice that responds sounds like Matt or Rhodes, it doesn't matter. The ambiguity only emphasizes their shared futures as the voice answers "One hundred percent" to the cheers of the Jericruise crowd. It fuels anticipation for the wrestlers' next move and asks the audience to stick together alongside them.[38]

While All In had infrastructural support, including crew and talent from Ring of Honor and New Japan that The Elite acknowledge, their shoot talk and the formal qualities of the

[38] DiArron M. (2022) analyzes social media posts around WWE wrestler Kofi Kingston's 2019 championship run to argue that "kayfabe is a discursive space in which fans speak and promotions are expected to listen" (p. 81). With The Elite we see how realness is produced through discursive action between fans and promotions in the construction of AEW.

podcasts largely framed All In as product and productive of their individual and collective work, and shared desires among themselves and fans for a more authentic professional wrestling. The Elite sustained this narrative as they began their new promotion All Elite Wrestling. Banet-Weiser (2012) argues that "to brand authenticity and structure it as part of a business plan is to understand experiences and, importantly, the emotions that accompany experiences, as distinct economic offerings" (p. 111-112). On January 1, 2019, the moment their New Japan contracts expired, The Elite took to *BTE* to announce the creation of All Elite Wrestling, where they would take on the roles of Executive Vice Presidents and top wrestlers. The promotion's name folds together the collaborative coming together of All In with the grinding hustle of The Elite and draws on the affective power of both.[39] Likewise, when AEW signs new wrestlers to the company it releases an announcement that declares the wrestler is "all elite," mimicking the announcements of fans and wrestlers that were "All In" for the independent event. Early promotional material and t-shirts declared that "AEW is for Everyone." The Elite constructed their major promotion as akin to indie wrestling, despite being backed by billionaire owner Tony Khan and optioned on the major television network TBS. On many levels, AEW has more in common with WWE than a local indie promotion operating out of a bar or legion hall. Yet, The Elite brand story exceeds its corporate materialities (p. 4). Instead, it is a promise of community and creative success that was given in the stories they told on shoot interview podcasts (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 4).

Shoot interview podcasts are a vehicle for wrestlers to tell personal narratives that

[39] Likewise, in the first year of production, all of AEW's annual pay-per-view events Double or Nothing, All Out, Full Gear, and Revolution took their names from phrases repeated by The Elite wrestlers at All In, on *BTE*, and during shoot interview podcasts. The names aim to evoke feelings of ownership, pride, and belonging in the intimate public that formed around their independent, New Japan, and YouTube work. The EVPs and CEO Tony Khan assume that their viewers will catch the references, or, if they are new to the game, latch on to the feelings of those in the know and desire to find out for themselves.

produce and use their social and cultural capital for branding opportunities. As Alison Hearn (2010) explains, "Work on the production of a branded 'self' involves creating a detachable, saleable image or narrative, which effectively circulate cultural meanings" (p. 198). In the stories that The Elite tell on podcasts, they construct AEW as a kind of promised land built from the hard work and love of wrestlers and fans— a promotion that, unlike WWE, produces more creative and real professional wrestling because it loves professional wrestling and encourages wrestlers' creativity. At the same time, they offer All In and their financial and industry success as evidence of their economic viability, what Consalvo and Paul (2019) call the money trail. They are as real as—or more real than—the WWE and therefore worthy of ongoing affective and economic investment. The AEW brand draws on the intersecting experiences of the wrestlers and the memories of audiences to create sensations of authenticity, and uses shoot interview podcasts as vectors for constructing and directing these sensations to the company.

Shoot Interview Podcasts as Records of Wrestler Pedigree

Branding realness takes ongoing authenticity work. Professional wrestlers from across the industry make appearances on shoot interview podcasts to brand themselves as real wrestlers and promote themselves and their activities. For those wrestlers who move to AEW from WWE or the indies, engaging in storytelling on shoot interview podcasts not only brands their authenticity, but demonstrates their fit within AEW's brand culture. As they chart their experiences in pro wrestling, these podcasts participate in the citational chain that verifies and brands them as real professional wrestlers worthy of affective and monetary investment outside of the WWE, which has largely been seen as the pinnacle of the American and Canadian pro wrestling industry. The podcasts become records of pedigree that support wrestlers' and AEW's claims of realness, and at the same time, sustain the hyper-masculine structures of power and the

social and economic rigging of the industry.

To have pedigree, wrestlers demonstrate how they have followed the correct paths,—"a line… that is already given in advance" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 119)—and were driven to AEW by real emotional investment, namely love, in and for pro wrestling. By pedigree, I mean a lineage in pro wrestling. To have pedigree is to have a background, a recorded genealogy. Pedigree is about tracing a heritage and about authentication. Stories of pedigree are highly relational and defined through an affective orientation—right feeling/feeling in the right direction—to pro wrestling that takes shape through a personal genealogy, citational practices, an inheritance from previously acclaimed wrestlers, and a resumé of work in the industry.

In many shoot interview podcasts, wrestlers establish and represent their deep roots in pro wrestling by narrating their childhood devotion and family connections to wrestling. Family is, perhaps, an obvious and traditional site from which wrestlers can draw out pedigree, establish authenticity, and make claims for why they are deserving of fan and industry investment; "wrestling has historically been—like many blue-collar industries—a family business" (Jansen, 2020, p. 316). It is full of real and theatrical families, including the most widely known McMahon family. Vincent Kennedy McMahon bought the WWF off his father in 1983 (Beekman, 2006) and brought his children, Shane and Stephanie, into the business as on-air performers and company executives. Significant to many of the shoot interview podcasts in discussion here is the Hart family. Stu and Helen Hart raised eight sons, all of them wrestlers, and four daughters, all of whom married wrestlers, around Calgary's Stampede Wrestling, before selling the company to McMahon.[40] The most famous Hart sons, Bret and Owen, later wrestled

[40] In 2022, Bret's sons revived "Hart Family Wrestling" in Calgary when they started the indie promotion Dungeon Wrestling, named in homage to the Hart basement where Stu trained his sons and other wrestlers. Recently, Bret has said in a shoot interview that McMahon never actually paid his father, but that his father it let go so as not to ruin Bret's "push" or prominent booking in WWF (Appelle, 2022).

in the WWF, where many of their storylines centered on brotherly competition and saw their parents, siblings, and spouses play intervening roles from the stands.

Family legacies take up significant space in pro wrestling stories and the industry. In a narrative told by Cody Rhodes on *Talk is Jericho* in the lead up to All In, Rhodes uses the backstage location of the podcast recording to set the stage for a story that constructs realness through the dynamics of family inheritance and childhood love and devotion. Recording the podcast from backstage at Osaka Jo Hall after Dominion 6.9, Jericho initiates the conversation by describing Rhodes as one of the "biggest pure wrestling fans" he's ever met (Jericho, 2018c, 7:20). The recognition leads Rhodes to recount a story of how, as a child, he broke "[his] family's unspoken rule" backstage by asking renowned Japanese wrestler Liger for an autograph without his father Dusty's knowledge (7:54). Rhodes is the son of the late Dusty Rhodes and younger brother of Dustin, both tenured wrestlers. At wrestling events, Cody kicks off his performances with the phrase "wrestling has more than one royal family," putting his family on par with the McMahons and Harts and demanding attention for his family legacy.[41] Yet, on *Talk is Jericho*, Rhodes' narrative highlights the entanglements between working, feeling, family and proximity that emerge in wrestler narratives of pedigree. As the son of a wrestler, Rhodes had been taught to follow the backstage rules of workers: you do not bother wrestlers for autographs or pictures backstage; you behave professionally. As a child, he had inherited the right to be backstage with the workers from his father, but only if he behaved like a real worker. In a sense, he was already working. However, as Rhodes recounts the story for the podcast audience, he also

[41] Significantly, during this time, Cody Rhodes could not use the last name "Rhodes" in the pro wrestling industry because the name "Cody Rhodes" was trademarked by the WWE. As noted in the introduction, he was known only as Cody. However, during his entrances at ROH, indie, and early AEW events, announcers worked around this restriction. Rhodes would often be accompanied to the ring by Brandi Rhodes, who is married to Cody, and ring announcers would announce the entrance of "Cody and Brandi Rhodes."

draws on ideologies of childhood innocence to shift himself from a knowing or entitled child of the business to a child-fan full of wonder and real love. In so doing, Rhodes frames himself as a real professional wrestler not only because of his family legacy, but also because of his childhood affection for Liger, which was so deep that he broke an industry rule.

The shoot interview podcast enables Rhodes to tell a story that divulges his intimate personal emotions towards pro wrestling. He is not only the son of a wrestler. He loves pro wrestling and his actions, perhaps, including the creation of All In and later AEW, are directed by this right kind of feeling.[42] While All In was already sold out, anxieties circulated in pro wrestling media around whether the event could sell PPV buys and measure up to WWE. In other words, were All In and The Elite wrestlers the real deal? As such, the wrestlers, Rhodes included, were tasked with reiterating their realness for the shoot interview podcast audiences who might not be familiar with their work on the indies and in New Japan. Rhodes taps into his family lineage and childhood devotion early in the episode to set the rest of their podcast conversation as one built on a familial foundation and fueled by love.

Most wrestlers do not have a paternal legacy to invoke on podcasts as their pedigree alongside their childhood love. In these instances, telling stories of childhood love that cite pedigreed wrestlers enables wrestlers to build out a genealogy from a familiar and familial wrestling home. As Ahmed (2017) writes, "citation is how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before; those who helped us find our way"; "they are the materials through which, from which we create our dwellings" (p. 15, 16). Upon signing at AEW after leaving WWE, Jon Moxley's used his *Talk is Jericho* interview to build out his wrestling genealogy. His discussion

[42] Thank you to Michael J. Altman, who brought up the importance of the discourse of "being there for the right reasons" in reality television and helped me make this connection. Rhodes' "right feeling" has been questioned by fans in response to Rhodes' departure from AEW and return to WWE in 2022.

with Jericho makes these links between citation, foundation building, and performance visible. He describes how "since I was a little kid, I was obsessed, just watching tapes" and explains that his former WWE character (Dean Ambrose) was born out of the wrestlers who inspired him, including Dusty Rhodes, Bret Hart, and "Big Japan death match guys" (Moxley on Jericho, 2019, 34:35).[43] Moxley makes the line of influence in his WWE character known to the audience. This authentication through citation is key for Moxley as he moves from WWE to AEW. His citation of acclaimed wrestlers "is a central technique in consolidating [a] trajectory" (Hemmings, 2005, p. 124), a wrestling genealogy to secure a new future. Although WWE is largely understood as defining what is and what is not pro wrestling in the industry, it is also framed as overly corporate, artificial, and manufactured within some circles of pro wrestling culture (Toepfer, 2019). By citing his sources, Moxley reauthenticates his WWE performances and sets up his performances at AEW as more real and from the heart.

Citation and discourses of childhood devotion also authenticate those wrestlers who have never been at a major promotion and need to identify themselves to the wrestling audience. In his shoot interview following his 2020 *AEW Dynamite* debut, Eddie Kingston turns to the disruption of childhood devotion to make himself legible as a real professional wrestler. Unlike Moxley, Kingston came to the major promotion from the indies and was unknown to many in AEW and *Talk is Jericho*'s audiences. The podcast operates as a vetting process where Jericho, the established star, enables Kingston to verify his wrestling history and answer the question: "Where you been all my life?" (Jericho, 2020f, 3:26). Kingston, like Moxley, negotiates the dynamics of inherited and inherent realness through his childhood investment in Bret Hart. In his

[43] Big Japan Pro Wrestling is a Japanese promotion, which launched in 1995, and is known for its death matches. In death matches wrestlers use props and weapons, such as thumbtacks, light tubes, and barbed wired, intending to draw blood from wrestlers' bodies and shock from audience members.

thick Yonkers accent, Kingston explains, “I stopped watching [WWF] wrestling cuz I was such a Bret Hart fan. When Bret Hart lost to Shawn Michaels [at WrestleMania 12], I was like, I’m done. I’m done… I said I’m done watching. Cuz to me, Bret Hart was a shooter. Came from the dungeon, you know… I was all about Bret. He was the grappler” (Kingston on Jericho, 2020f, 45:15). Hart’s lineage and training made him real to Kingston, and he assumes Jericho and the audience’s familiarity with Hart’s family legacy. Significant to Hart’s biography is how his father Stu, a known shooter, “stretched out” trainees, including his sons, in the family house basement. By painfully contorting his trainees, Stu is said to have taught Bret how to hurt opponents in order to avoid injuring them in matches. For Kingston, Hart was the more real wrestler in the match against Michaels and should have been booked as such. By narrating his childhood experience of a rupture of realness, Kingston attests to his own deep and long-time commitment to authenticity. He suggests that this commitment orients how he approaches working his own matches at AEW (Ahmed, 2017, p. 187). He brings this commitment to realness to the new promotion.

Performances and narratives of pro wrestling families on shoot interview podcasts reflect broader social discourses of the family as a site of social reproduction where likeness is generated through children (Ahmed, 2006, p. 122), and where likeness may also be understood as a site of shared emotion and attachment, most significantly in the form of love. As Jon Moxley tells Jericho, “Wrestling is my first love, my only love beside my wife” (Jericho, 2019, 33:13). Families and childhood provide a foundation in loving pro wrestling and an entry into the culture and industry. Thus, through such discourse, familial and childhood attachment becomes a means for participants to stake a claim for an inherited and inherent realness and a place in the alternative wrestling company. Rather than frame pro wrestlers solely as exceptional figures

within the industry, shoot interview podcasts provide Rhodes, Moxley and Kingston with the site to tell and circulate familiar and familial anecdotes that align with those of fans and other participants and emphasize a shared "common emotional world" (Berlant, 2008, p. 10).

Families and childhood play an important role in the ways in which fans describe their personal relationships to pro wrestling. In my survey, I asked respondents to indicate how they came to start watching wrestling. Forty-five percent indicated they found wrestling through family members and seventy-five percent responded that they first began watching pro wrestling under the age of twelve.[44] Moreover, like pro wrestlers' podcast stories, fan narratives emphasize their childhood devotion to figures from pedigreed families. Some of the survey respondents framed their attachment to pro wrestlers through childhood experiences: "Bret Hart is a childhood hero."[45] Sonya Ballantyne, a Swampy Cree filmmaker, writer, and wrestling fan originally from Misipawistik First Nation in Northern Manitoba, describes how she dreamed of being a wrestler as a child: "I wanted to wear black and pink [the Harts' trademark colours] and change my last name to Hart" (2020, p. 190; S. Ballantyne, personal communication, February 8, 2021). A dream to be a pro wrestler was a dream to be a Hart. In the shoot interview podcasts, the wrestlers show themselves to be sharing common pasts and dreams with wrestling fans.

Podcasting's cultural codes of intimacy emphasize these shared pasts and dreams. Listening to podcasts can have the approximate effect for the listener as eavesdropping on an intimate conversation (K. Collins, 2018, p. 229). In Rhodes' Moxley's and Kingston's stories, the shoot podcast audience might experience the sensations of listening in on a conversation not

[44] Likewise, in my interviews multiple participants described first watching wrestling as children with family members, including siblings, parents, uncles, and grandparents. Many participants or interviewees who did not grow up with pro wrestling describe coming into a kind of community or family when they became fans.
[45] In my survey, ten respondents (nine male- and one female-identifying) pointed to Hart as their favourite wrestler and turned to his in-ring capacity in their explanations of their devotion to him.

unlike the ones they might have with fellow fans or family members when they describe their own childhood devotion or shifting alliances in pro wrestling. The wrestlers are "friends in your ears" (McGregor, 2022, p. 92). In this sense, as the wrestlers promote themselves as pro wrestlers and AEW as a promotion, they also sell themselves as wrestling audience members. They are fellow fans (Reinhard, 2021). As Serazio (2019) explains, in sports media "the audience has always partly been the *product*… Fellow fans are sold to each other as the inventory for fellowship and the reason for caring" (p. 144). Rhodes, Moxley, and Kingston position themselves within this fellowship or intimate public as real pro wrestling fans and offer up their shared love of wrestling with those listening as a reason for caring about them as wrestlers. These shared intimacies around wrestling fandom prime the audience to cheer for the wrestlers at AEW, readying the audience to "pop" when they step out to the ring.

Shoot interview podcast narratives also show the wrestlers as recipients of care and training from already-established wrestlers in order to demonstrate a line of pedigree from acclaimed wrestlers to themselves and illustrate themselves as inheritors of the wrestlers' realness. In their first *Talk is Jericho* interview after leaving WWE, soon-to-be AEW wrestlers Dax Harwood and Cash Wheeler, known now as the tag team FTR, bookend their narrative about their WWE career with accounts of the support they received from legendary wrestlers, Dusty Rhodes and Bret Hart.[46] When asked by Jericho to describe their time at NXT, WWE's

[46] FTR were known as The Revival in WWE and framed as "reviving" traditional tag team wrestling from the 1980s. Upon leaving the company they were briefly called The Revolt in reference to them "revolting" against the establishment of WWE. However, the name was already in use by an indie tag team, leading Harwood and Wheeler to change their name to FTR, an allusion to a *BTE* bit in which Cody Rhodes would lead Ring of Honor audiences in chants of "Fuck The Revival." "FTR" acted as a short-hand for the bit in future episodes.
I use "legendary" here because it is a term that circulates throughout pro wrestling media and points to how wrestlers from the 1980s and 1990s are accorded with mythical status in wrestling discourse. "Legend" is also a particular contract status used by WWE as "a way of capitalizing on the past careers of otherwise retired (and in some cases deceased) wrestlers" through merchandising, including video game characters, action figures, apparel, and DVDs (Laine, 2019a, p. 95).

developmental program, Harwood calls Dusty, NXT's then-head producer, their biggest supporter (Jericho, 2020c, 6:00) and narrates how Dusty received them. Wheeler then expands:

> I firmly believe that if it wasn't for Dusty we might not have stuck as a tag team… My first promo class, me and David [Dax] did a promo together. It was my first one with Dusty. I was obviously extremely nervous. And we did it, and Dusty was like, this is the direction I want you to go… I want you guys to never leave each other's side… I want you guys to become the tag team that I think you can be. He had unwaving faith in us... He'd push for it and he made it happen. He would come while we were doing in-ring drills and he would get us out of class to come sit with him and just talk and eat homemade ice cream and get to know us and get to know character stuff…or listen to Willie Nelson in his office (Wheeler on Jericho, 2020c, 7:30-9:30).

Their narrative describes an intimate relationship with Dusty, one not necessarily shared by the other NXT wrestlers, who were not pulled out of class to talk. Wheeler's naming of Willie Nelson as the music of choice attests to an "authentic relationship" signified by country music fandom. All three wrestlers are southerners—Wheeler and Harwood both hail from North Carolina, while Rhodes shared Nelson's hometown of Austin.

Likewise, the description of eating ice cream together speaks to their common embodiment that may be perceived as more down-home authentic than the spectacular heavily-muscled bodies of many professional wrestlers. While the well-defined body is most often the standard of the wrestler body, in this case, Harwood and Wheeler's big, slightly thicker and softer, but still hyper-masculine bodies reference the less chiseled bodies of 1980s wrestlers. More importantly, it places them in direct line to Dusty. Harwood states, "We weren't body guys anyway, so we'd eat the ice cream," and Wheeler adds, "He was training us in his footsteps,"

alluding to Dusty's fat body (Harwood on Jericho, 2020c, 9:30). In their narratives, Dusty brings Wheeler and Harwood into the familial and social order and identifies them as possessing the qualities needed to be a wrestler; they share attributes with and identified by Dusty, and receive forms of mentorship and care required to shape them as wrestlers. As Ahmed writes (2019), "An inheritance not only can be *what* you receive but can be a matter of *how* you are received. An inheritance can be an easing of being, an enabling— how spaces are shaped by those who came before" (p. 165). By being recognized as alike by acclaimed wrestlers, the wrestlers show themselves as having been received into and welcomed by important figures in the pro wrestling industry. At the same time, the podcast circulates discourse that describes real wrestling bodies and, therefore, also constructs the hyper-masculine body as the real wrestler body.

Good Work and the Excellence of Execution

Yet, an authentic love of wrestling and line of influence is not enough to demonstrate that a wrestler has pedigree. Real professional wrestlers must have a record of work in the ring. On the podcasts and in other cultural spaces, participants analyze and debate a wrestler's "workrate," their capacity, effort, and endurance. More elite titles of "good worker," "technical worker," and "technician" all bestow value on those considered to be especially good performers and point to how wrestlers develop and employ specialized expertise, skills, and knowledge through training, practice, and performance. In shoot interview podcasts, wrestlers narrate work capacity to distinguish themselves as not only fans.

Work is related to pedigree because "good work" is defined and described in relation to previous performances and workers. As a result, FTR call up Bret Hart and his cultural capital in narratives of their work pedigree or capacity to brand themselves as real workers upon leaving WWE. Despite retiring from wrestling in 2000 due to injury, Hart, who a WWF commentator

nicknamed the "Excellence of Execution," has been lauded for his technical work and stands as a reference point that directs participants on how to understand and/or perform wrestling work.[47] For example, in my survey, one respondent noted Hart's "technical prowess, presence in ring," while two other respondents cited Hart's "wrestling and storytelling abilities" and his being "able to have a great match with just about anyone" as why Hart is worthy of being beloved as their favourite wrestler. Likewise, podcaster Marty DeRosa (2022) observes that AEW wrestlers, including FTR, have increasingly performed in-ring citations of Hart's previous matches by recreating sequences and performing his trademark moves (11:05). These in-ring tributes demonstrate the wrestlers' knowledge and love of Hart's work.

In telling stories and performing matches that cite Hart, FTR affirm Hart's position as a good worker, but more importantly, they draw on the already-established affectivity towards and recognition of Hart and his performances to animate their own work as good work and worthy of audience affection. Speaking to Renee Paquette on *The Sessions,* Harwood explains: "As a kid, [Hart] made me feel a certain way. I think that's why I wrestle, and Cash [Wheeler] too, we wrestle the way we do… Bret made me feel a certain way and I want to make people feel that way too, emotional… I want an emotional connection every match we have, just like he had" (Harwood on Paquette, 2022, 45:00). In this brief statement, Harwood touches on Hart's prestige, childhood nostalgia, and industry aims of drawing audience emotional investment to explain his own work performances. They aim to work in Hart's legacy.

[47] In a *Bleacher Report* article entitled "Why Daniel Bryan Is the Best Technical Wrestler Since Bret Hart" Dilan Ames (2014) cites Hart as the expert technical wrestler to break down what separates popular wrestler Daniel Bryan (now known as Bryan Danielson in AEW) from other wrestlers. He writes about Bryan: "he's a wrestling purist—he stays true to mat wrestling and isn't too flashy. He doesn't rely on brute force or strength but rather his skill and technique. Bryan is very precise with his submissions." Hart, with his legacy as a trained shooter, is put forth as the technical standard. By drawing comparison between Hart and Bryan, Ames makes the case for Bryan's good work. As such, precision and skill define the best work and that work is already entangled with pedigree.

In the same *The Sessions* shoot interview, Harwood again outlines how their matches, like Hart's matches, rely on physicality and affectivity. Focusing on an acclaimed match against the Young Bucks [Matt and Nick Jackson] at the 2020 Full Gear PPV, Harwood describes the match as built on intensity and emotion (Harwood on Paquette, 2022, 23:40). Wheeler supports his partner's statement, recounting how he was emotionally and physically drained— "just wore out"—after the match (Wheeler on Paquette, 2022, 24:29). In the stories they tell, FTR are real professional wrestlers because they do real bodily professional wrestling work. In this sense, FTR's discussions of work operate as a form of shooting by pointing to the sweat, tears, blood, and pain that work produces in wrestlers' bodies. As Pratt (2019) explains, "wrestlers use their *actual* bodies in a myriad of ways to produce a *fictional* story, and in the process, put their bodies through tremendous abuse" (p. 145). They position themselves as *not only* fans by narrating their experiences of creating and performing matches, thereby, exhibiting themselves as good workers, who perform emotionally intense work, bodily endurance, and do the job required of them.

But their wrestling labour and bodies are, in fact, produced also through the stories they and others, including Hart, tell about them and that are circulated and popularized by shoot interview podcasts. On the shoot interview podcasts, Harwood and Wheeler share how Hart has received their recent AEW work to show themselves as recipients of Hart's legacy. Harwood reads a text from Hart: "Really enjoyed your match with The Young Bucks. First time I ever really got to watch them. Great pace, great action, brilliant timing. Kudos to all. Best tag team in the biz today" (38:06). Hart's language and speech produce and sustain FTR as real professional wrestlers and good workers (Butler, 2021). By calling FTR the "best tag team," Hart, who referred to himself as "the best there is, the best there was, and the best there ever will be," taps

FTR as heirs of his accolades and status as a real worker. When Harwood reads the personal and intimate text for the podcast audience, FTR publicly claim this inheritance. As Judith Butler (2021) explains, "it is by being interpolated within the terms of language that a certain social existence of the body first becomes possible" (p. 5). In Hart's address, FTR recognize themselves as the best tag team. Hart's accolades construct their style of work—their pace, action, timing—as good work. FTR are constituted as good workers and real wrestlers in the wrestling public. Moreover, AEW is framed as the location in which good workers can do good work.

Kayfabe Realism: What's Best for Business

In shoot interviews and pro wrestling culture more broadly, work capacity cannot be separated from wrestler pedigree because cultural values of how work is done are shaped by the prior performances of already-valued wrestlers, and the discourses and affects that surround them; "such [aural] interventions do not simply frame the action, they *are* action" (Warden, 2017, p. 22). Through the repeated citations of and narratives about Hart and other already acclaimed wrestlers on the shoot interview podcasts, wrestlers secure a dominant narrative about what makes them good workers and real professional wrestlers. Bodies, the bodily labour required to perform pro wrestling matches, and how wrestling feels are central to pro wrestling's claims to realness across its media forms, and therefore, central to how wrestlers construct their own authenticity and realness. As the shoot interview podcasts demonstrate, whose bodies, work, and work capacity become legible as that of real professional wrestlers is highly contingent on the stories that are told about good workers. Podcasts participate in the construction and maintenance of kayfabe realism and its intersecting structures of power by further defining and fixing what good wrestling work is, what good work feels like, and who is, therefore, a good

worker and real professional wrestler. In many cases, real professional wrestler means white, cisgender, straight hyper-masculine wrestlers.

However, as the deep stories shared by wrestlers on shoot interview podcasts reveal, what is understood as real exerts pressures on what seems real or possible within pro wrestling. Such pressures are already bound up with and established in social, cultural, and industry structures. Even as AEW has branded itself as an alternative to WWE and its conventions, it has largely worked within the constraints of kayfabe realism, which WWE played a large part in producing. Kayfabe realism—what feels real or is imagined to feel real—conditions wrestling cultural production. It shapes what types of on-air narratives, matches, and champions are imagined possible. It is sustained as a pervasive atmosphere of what *feels real* and generated through kayfabe's performativity, its always-already-ongoing narratives and repetitious doing or citation of the norm in and out of the ring, such as in the deep stories just discussed.

Further, kayfabe realism is driven by what's "best for business," the logics of capitalist industry that are entangled with pro wrestling's ethos of protecting the business. As Banet-Weiser (2012) reminds, "even if we discard as false the simple opposition between authentic and the inauthentic, we still must reckon with the power of authenticity—of the self, of experience, or relationships" (p. 5). Kayfabe realism constrains thought and action in the industry and shapes how certain practices, narratives, and wrestlers become understood as real, believable, and good investments. It determines which matches and wrestlers are then booked for performances (Fisher, 2009, p. 16). These dynamics replicate already established capitalist, gendered, and racialized structures of power in pro wrestling and come to light in how wrestling workers talk about industry practices on shoot interview podcasts and in how shoot interview podcasts themselves are produced.

Pro wrestling shoot talk on podcasts demonstrates how work is valued and acknowledged, and also reveals how not all workers are valued equally or recognized as real workers. Even as wrestling workers talk about opportunities to become wrestlers and do wrestling work, many describe without critique the social and professional hierarchies that limit how wrestlers can make themselves legible as real wrestlers and get over with audiences. By attending to shoot interview podcasts, we can not only attend to how wrestlers engage in shoot talk to access opportunity and support the industry, but also see how shoot talk and shoot talk podcasts can reveal and sustain exclusionary structures.

Unlike the Moxley, Kingston, and FTR shoot interview podcast appearances, women signed as wrestlers to AEW generally do not typically appear on *Talk is Jericho* within weeks or days of their AEW debuts. Both Britt Baker and Nyla Rose were initial AEW signees in early 2019. However, Baker's *Talk is Jericho* episode, "The Blood, Sweat & Teeth of Dr. Britt Baker DMD," came more than a year after her initial signing with the company, only after she broke records for merchandise sales from female performers at the company. Likewise, despite being featured in the first Women's Championship match on AEW's premiere *Dynamite* episode in October 2019, Rose's interview took place only after she won the belt the following year.[48] Jericho featured men signed to AEW from the indies, such as Luchasaurus, Marko Stunt, and Peter Avalon, during AEW's first year. Yet, Rose was the first AEW woman without WWE experience interviewed on the podcast.[49] As lower profile wrestlers when they joined AEW, Rose and Baker were not afforded the same promotional support and collegial welcome from their fellow AEW wrestler that the former WWE wrestlers and some indie men received. As

[48] At the time of writing, Rose has had one of the shortest belt runs, which also limited her opportunities to be represented as an important and real wrestler.
[49] In the thirty-seven episodes of *Talk is Jericho* that featured AEW wrestlers in 2019 and 2020, only seven episodes featured women as guests.

such, Baker and Rose's ability to use the shoot interview podcast to narrate their realness as pro wrestlers and commitment to AEW, and get over with the new audience, was delayed and limited.

Arguably, the women wrestlers' initial omission from the prominent podcast, which inhibits their opportunities to brand themselves as real wrestlers, has a more detrimental effect on them, than it would on their indie male coworkers. Women wrestlers, even when they are thin and athletic like Baker, are still marked as unreal or inauthentic in the American/Canadian industry, which has been shaped by white, hyper-masculine, straight cismen who have maintained positions of power as company executives and as performers and in-ring champions. This tradition continues at AEW. For large parts of wrestling history, when women's matches happened at all, they were treated as sexualized spectacles or bathroom breaks—not serious wrestling worthy of critical attention or acclaim. Women wrestlers work in the wake of this history. Wrestling journalist Kristen Ashly notes that despite having years of experience, popular online discourse frames AEW women wrestlers, Baker and Rose included, as "green" or inexperienced, not ready for TV time or main event matches, two key components wrestlers use to increase fan investment and financial income from outside bookings and merch sales (K. Ashly, personal communication, February 12, 2021).

Upon getting the chance to talk on *Jericho*, Baker, like many other women wrestlers, works against this discourse by describing her commitment to and right feeling towards pro wrestling, bringing to mind many of the hustle narratives employed by The Elite. Baker, who is also a practicing dentist, recounts juggling dental and pro wrestling school at the same time, often illustrating the moments where her desire to wrestle took away from her dental studies. She performs a "personal investment in the work" (Berg, 2021), which Berg (2021) and Consalvo

and Paul (2019) track as similar social imperatives required for working in the porn and gaming industries respectively. To show her investment, Baker describes watching wrestling and reading Jericho's book while in class, and falling asleep while studying because she was so tired from wrestling training (Jericho, 2020b). In her stories, Baker demonstrates an ethic of "wanting to be there" (Berg, 2021, p. 45), which means being there for herself and "not just for the money" (p. 75) or for publicity for her dental career. She remembers: "So after training, I would come home and study a little bit and then I would go to the gym to work out. Cuz I always said if I'm going to be a wrestler, then I want to look like a wrestler. And part of that is being in really good shape. I was always so far in debt with trying to have really great gear too. I never made enough money to pay for the gear I was wearing at the time" (Baker on Jericho, 2020b, 8:57-9:17). In Baker's account, she outlines her bodily and financial investment in being a wrestler. She gives to the industry. Such demonstration, like the body work to "look like a wrestler," is "[all] part of the job" of making herself legible as a real professional wrestler to the podcast audience (Berg, 2021, p. 75).

Yet, even as Baker works against discourse that frames women wrestlers as non-workers or faux wrestlers, her narrative maintains the white hyper-masculine power structures of AEW and pro wrestling more broadly through its patterns of citation. Describing her recent match and heel turn, Baker bestows praise and recognition back onto the already acclaimed wrestlers. As Ahmed (2019) explains, "Citation too is another way a history is kept alive—citation as a reference system. You are asked to follow the well-trodden paths of citation, to cite properly is to cite those deemed to have already the most influence" (p. 167). Baker credits Omega with the idea for her to turn heel, Rhodes with shaping the character, and identifies Jericho as inspiration for her first heel promo to the audience after her heel turn (Baker on Jericho, 2020b). Here, like

FTR's invocation of Bret Hart, she frames her performance as being sound and grounded as a wrestling performance, which Jericho backs up in their conversation and by highlighting her as a podcast guest. Baker illustrates how she has been shaped and vetted by the ongoing training, experience, and knowledge of pedigreed wrestlers.[50] In her discussion of her performance, she signals her realness by dwelling in line and in proximity to established and acclaimed wrestlers. By following the paths before her and recognizing the hypermasculine wrestlers, Baker further demonstrates her social investment in pro wrestling (Ahmed, 2006, p. 17).

It seems to be working. As of January 1, 2022, Baker has appeared in over one hundred episodes of AEW television, more than any other woman on the AEW roster (Cagematch, n.d.). Appealing to dominant discursive frames and established citation patterns, Britt Baker has largely situated herself as a real professional wrestler marketable to the AEW audience. Yet, AEW largely limits the women's division TV time to one match a night and fails to give them the same promotion and merchandizing as their male counterparts (noconnostalgia, 2022). She reinvests the already established sexist structures with power and, perhaps, places The Elite as the next generation of pedigreed wrestlers who can define what's real in wrestling.

However, as a white ciswoman Baker receives opportunities to make herself legible as a pro wrestler that Nyla Rose, the first and only openly trans wrestler in a major American professional wrestling company, does not receive. Rose's appearance on *Talk is Jericho* further demonstrates the ways marginalized wrestlers are not received on shoot interview podcasts and the industry in the same manner, even as they attempt to narrate their careers through the

[50] Baker had proximity to The Elite wrestlers when she arrived in AEW. Her partner, Adam Cole, was a member of Bullet Club alongside Omega and the Jacksons prior to going to WWE and is close friends with the EVPs. This is not to say that she got her position because she is "Adam Cole's girlfriend," but rather to note that Baker was familiar to and with the EVPs. She had an entryway for approaching them for advice that the other women wrestlers signed to the company did not have.

dominant appeals to realness, such as pedigree and work, that wrestlers from conventionalized positionalities use. Rather, marginalized wrestlers must also narrate aspects of their personal lives related to their identities, including those surrounding their embodiment, race, gender, and sexuality, in order for their pedigree to be received.

For Rose, who is also Oneida, Black, queer, and large, making herself legible as a real pro wrestler requires her to also make herself recognizable as a trans woman. This becomes clear from the top of her *Talk is Jericho* interview. In his introduction to "Nyla Rose Transcends AEW," Jericho states that he wants this talk to be an "educational episode" (Jericho, 2020a, 2:33). Although the interview touches on the subjects Jericho discusses with other wrestlers—Nyla describes her training, work in Japan, and how she has been influenced by Nagayo, an acclaimed Joshi wrestler (woman wrestler in Japan)—much of the interview asks Rose to educate Jericho and listeners on what it means to be transgender, rather than what it means to be a wrestler. Seconds after turning to a discussion about her training, Jericho quickly turns the conversation to how she presented her gender at wrestling school (Jericho, 2020a, 17:30). As a result, she has less opportunity to describe her influences and trace her wrestling pedigree. Rather, she is stopped in her tracks, unable to follow the typical citational line followed by FTR and even Baker. Rose instead encounters what Viviane Namaste calls the "autobiographical imperative," which requires that she narrate her transition and perform additional and educational labour for Jericho and the podcast audience (Namaste in Baril, 2018, p. 2). Rose defines vocabulary, including "cisgender" and "male-presenting" (Jericho, 2020a, 21:30, 17:30), and corrects common framings of transgender identities that use before and after binaries. She describes how she "always was transgender," but "didn't know it" (N. Rose on Jericho, 2020a, 7:40). Although, Jericho is largely supportive, Rose has to redirect Jericho when he poses

questions that ask her to speak about her genitalia (Jericho, 2020a, 22:15).

On *Talk is Jericho,* Rose has the opportunity for more visibility as a wrestler, yet she also has more visibility as a trans person and, perhaps, more vulnerability to violence. As such, the *Talk is Jericho* interview attests to the tensions between visibility and invasions of privacy that trans women and marginalized people often experience, when they are tasked with representing their identities and educating publics in the media (Thom, 2020, p. 138). As scholars and trans activists note, an increase in trans visibility in the media since the 2010s has been met with ongoing anti-trans violence that disproportionately affects trans people of colour (Fischer, 2019; Koch-Rein et al, 2020). Likewise, Rose testifies to the ways that performing such educational labour is thrust upon marginalized individuals. She states that not everyone wants to act as "your college professor" (N. Rose on Jericho, 2020a, 54:34). Yet, she explains that she feels a responsibility to educate. She states, "Who else is on the platform that I have at the moment" (N. Rose on Jericho, 2020a, 55:15). Rose's statement reminds us that the additional educational and representational labour she performs, in part, results from the fact that she is currently the only openly trans wrestler working for a major wrestling company.

Shoot interview podcasts largely replicate marginalization and inequalities that are built into AEW and pro wrestling's hierarchal labour and pay structures, and which orient support, TV time, and prominent bookings towards already established, working, and usually white hyper-masculine wrestlers under the discourse of "best for business." This process re-inscribes white hyper-masculine wrestlers as the most real and most over with audiences. At the same time, shoot interview podcasts also provide wrestlers and promoters with the platform to circulate discourse that frames pro wrestling's social and economic hierarchies as commonplace and logical, thereby participating in practices that uphold the industry hierarchies.

On shoot interview podcasts, higher profile AEW workers and management point to the company as generous at the same time as they describe clear hierarchies at work. On a November 2020 appearance on *AEW Unrestricted*, Cody Rhodes spoke with hosts referee Aubrey Edwards and on-air commentator Tony Schiavone about hiring practices and contracts during the first phase of the COVID19 pandemic. He proudly explains that AEW has multiple contract tiers: "Agreed to appear' is tier zero, meaning you will get a bonus . . . . . It's the COVID era, they have no other work because there are no indies . . . Tier zero is a signing bonus and exclusivity to us… we get a first option on you and we guarantee you X amount of dates. The exclusivity is case by case . . . We have tier one, two, three, four, and tier Jericho" (Rhodes on Edwards & Schiavone, 2020, 23:37-27:45). Rhodes's breakdown of contracts "points to disparity between worker contracts, at the same time as he suggests that, because there is no indie work," lower profile wrestlers hired at "tier zero" for pandemic work "should be grateful for AEW's work and generosity" (Fontaine, 2022, p. 298). He further emphasizes that AEW president Tony Khan's pay is "super generous," and, drawing on his own family legacy and deep knowledge of the business, states, "If you ask some of these extras what they're making… What! My dad would have lost it. What!" (Rhodes on Edwards & Schiavone, 2020, 26:42). Rhodes' invocation of how Dusty "would have lost it" frames AEW's lower contracts as progressive and benevolent towards workers, even while it outlines how tier zero benefits AEW by granting the company the choice of when to employ a wrestler and for how long (Fontaine, 2022, p. 298).[51] Rhodes' discussion highlights pay and labour inequities and normalizes the precarity faced by

[51] Somewhat paradoxically, Rhodes also states, "Never tell anyone in wrestling how much you make!" (Rhodes on Edwards & Schiavone, 2020, 28:00). Pro wrestling's culture of secrecy means "it is difficult to find information about contracts and what forms of financial and employment security wrestlers have" (Fontaine, 2022, p. 298). Moreover, this culture of secrecy also means that those wrestlers without insider knowledge about contracts may be more likely to lowball themselves when it comes to pay.

low profile independent wrestlers.

By appearing on shoot interview podcasts, Rhodes and other high-profile wrestlers or promoters largely control the narrative of what forms of contracts are culturally acceptable and considered equitable in pro wrestling. Generally speaking, low profile independent wrestlers, also known as "enhancement talent," do not appear on major shoot interview podcasts and therefore do not receive the opportunity to account for work, nor to describe whether or not they understand the established system as fair. Enhancement talent are generally local independent wrestlers, hired for a single event, who "do the job" for higher profile wrestlers, losing the match and making their opponents look good or more real. For this reason, they are sometimes referred to despairingly as "jobbers." As Jansen (2020) writes, enhancement talent are "given less screen time, [and are] provided less opportunity for character development" while still being responsible for "getting over" with the audience (p. 317).

During the pandemic, when crowds were not allowed at AEW weekly tapings, enhancement talent also performed as the in-house audience. They supported higher profile wrestlers' work and asserted to the at-home crowd that these matches were worth watching (Fontaine, 2022). For a local independent wrestler, working as enhancement talent, like performing as a film extra, promises "a foothold in the industry by building a resume and a social network, which then leads to a stable career" (Mayer, 2016, p. 67). Enhancement talent work is "aspirational labor," "a mode of (mostly) uncompensated, independent work" that is driven by the "ideal of getting paid to do what you love" (Duffy, 2018, p. 4), or as the wrestlers might say, working in the business that they love (Fontaine, 2022, p. 297).[52] On *Talk is Jericho,* Kingston

[52] Dewitt King (2021) finds that "the deregulated nature of the pro wrestling industry is built and sustained through a genealogy of precarity which aligns with other labor constituenc[ies] such as sex workers, barbers, hair stylist[s], Uber drivers, and personal trainers" (n.p.).

notes that when he did his initial AEW appearance as an independent wrestler, he did not expect to be signed to the company. Rather, he saw the TV time publicity as an opportunity to raise his stock at independent promotions. He tells Jericho: "When the indies start back up [after the COVID19 pandemic shutdown], [I'm] jacking up my price" (Kingston on Jericho, 2020f, 9:29). Likewise, the individual appearance "is also advertisement for the range of income-producing activities workers undertake" (Berg, 2021, p. 73). The match can draw customers or fans to the wrestlers' side hustles, such as merch websites, Cameos, and meet and greets, which will all be discussed in the next chapter. The "performers' hoped-for outcome from an individual gig [or match] extends beyond a day's pay and the promise of being hired again" (p. 73).[53] Pro wrestling, particularly major televised wrestling, relies on the work of enhancement talent. For the promotion, enhancement talent are cheap day labourers that are put to work in service of their stars who shape the narrative of how work should go on podcasts.

When we do hear from wrestlers who have worked as enhancement talent at AEW on shoot interview podcasts, it is generally because they have received a permanent contract with the company. On these podcasts, wrestlers' stories suggest an acceptance of "paying dues" as their narratives tend to document their time and effort in the industry, and appear to demonstrate how their work has paid off. Yet, these shoot interviews also recount moments where industry support was extended beyond normative expectations or requirements. Kingston's *Talk is Jericho* account of his first AEW appearance, which he gave after he was signed to the company, illustrates how "getting over" is contingent on decisions made by the promoters, fellow wrestlers, and already-in-place work practices. In July 2020, Kingston, in narrative terms,

[53] As I (2022) also note, "On *AEW Unrestricted*, Rhodes reveals that Red Velvet, who had been working matches and in the crowd during COVID19 had been signed by AEW, though not yet announced. A number of other wrestlers have also signed over the last year, suggesting that aspirational labor can be converted into long term work" (pp. 297-298).

answered an “open door” challenge for a match against Rhodes, the TNT Champion at the time. In industry terms, AEW booked Kingston as enhancement talent for a single match against Rhodes with no guarantees of another match. Kingston, who is known as good on the mic from his work on the indies, was allowed promo time to tell the audience who he was and why he was there. Unlike most enhancement talent, Kingston received an entrance; he was not already in the ring when the segment started. Kingston marched from backstage, microphone in hand, cutting a biting two-minute promo that challenged Rhodes’ self-proclaimed work ethic by pointing to Rhodes’ privileged upbringing in contrast to his own working-class childhood and decades grinding on the indies. He gave the match and his presence on *Dynamite* emotional motivation. Their following match went for over eleven minutes, far longer than most enhancement talent matches.

Figure 22. Still of Kingston cutting a promo on Cody Rhodes during his AEW debut (All Elite Wrestling, 2020).

As Kingston recounts, his appearance was not typical of enhancement talent matches. He tells Jericho, “Gotta give Cody credit, man. He was so giving. You know what I mean? He didn’t

have to do what he did in that match with me. He could have went in and been like, you know what, you like to talk shit, kid—we're going three minutes. I'm beating you. I would have been like, okay. Cuz that would have been my job." (9:35). Kingston's account illustrates how lower profile wrestlers recognize power hierarchies and acquiesce to them. It also shows how lower profile wrestlers welcome and need more equitable performance and work practices, including TV time, match time, and deeper on-screen narratives. His podcast interview draws attention to how he was enabled to shine for the AEW audience, and at the same time, points to how those in power can limit and control the opportunities of lower profile wrestlers. His statement reflects what scholar and former pro wrestler Laurence de Garis (2020) describes as the most important lesson a wrestler can learn: "you get over to the extent someone puts you over…being talented doesn't mean you'll get the push" (p. 208). Getting over with an audience requires structural support from the industry and established figures, including TV time and podcast appearances.

In both Rhodes' narrative about AEW's generous pay and Kingston's narrative about Rhodes' generosity as a performer and booker, AEW figures as a site of opportunity for pro wrestlers. Yet, wrestlers' narratives about the industry practices and the stories they are able to tell on shoot interview podcasts demonstrate the inequities that wrestlers, particularly those hired as enhancement talent for individual matches and marginalized wrestlers, including women, queer, and racialized wrestlers, face when trying to make themselves legible as real professional wrestlers at the promotion and more broadly. By attending to wrestling's deep stories on shoot interview podcasts, what feels real and "what is presented as necessary and inevitable"— as "best for business"— can be demonstrated to be contingent on already established capitalist, gendered and racialized structures of power in pro wrestling (Fisher, 2009, p. 17). While smaller shoot interview podcasts may highlight lower profile independent wrestlers, the most popular

shoot interview podcasts generally feature already popular wrestlers and circulate and platform narratives that shape how realness is understood in relation to wrestlers and pro wrestling.

Best for Business

By attending to shoot interview podcasts we can see how what feels real is shaped by the deep stories of pedigree and work, and already-in-place and ongoing industry practices and hierarchies. We can also consider how realness is put to work by wrestlers as they perform authenticity on podcasts in order to access opportunity and income. What is perceived to be already-over and imagined or felt as real directs future bookings. Already popular wrestlers receive invites to interview on the most-listened to podcasts. A wrestler who has drawn crowds and money is assumed to draw again. Name recognition and established realness matter in wrestling across indie and major wrestling promotions. Some of the promoters I spoke to described booking a wrestler that they were not personally fans of because others in the promotion wanted to book him and they knew that he would draw. While they did not use the phrase "best for the business," the popular pro wrestling phrase perhaps applies here. Their narratives of "knowing he would draw" gives the impression of an inevitable sell-out or popular event. Booking a wrestler with a known track record of selling tickets is what is "best for business." Such narratives unintentionally obscure the contingencies that must come together for a wrestler to be so over, including their podcast appearances or ongoing bookings, which lead to snowballing of higher visibility on social media, name recognition, and more merch and ticket sales.

On shoot interview podcasts, The Elite traffics in authenticity to brand their company and performances with realness and community. They tell stories that work within the pro wrestling genre, cultural context, and "shared vocabularies of meaning" around work and a business that

we love (McGregor, 2022, p. 103). They engage and produce real feelings, real memories, and real shared experiences in and out of the ring to construct AEW's brand. AEW taps into deep stories around indie wrestling and labours of love to set itself apart from WWE and frame itself as organic and community-based, even while having millions of dollars in backing. At the same time, professional wrestlers across the industry turn to shoot interview podcasts and engage in patterns of citation around pedigree and work to make themselves legible as inheritors of the realness from already-established professional wrestlers, and to demonstrate their loving orientation towards pro wrestling work and access opportunity and the structural supports.

Overall, I argue that the brand stories, feelings of realness, and citational frames produced and replicated on shoot interview podcasts inform pro wrestling industry happenings. These happenings include booking and hiring practices and have discriminatory effects on upcoming queer, trans, non-binary, women, and racialized wrestlers, even as they participate in self-branding and similar narratives of realness, love and creative entrepreneurship. As Ahmed (2006) explains, "It is important that we think not only about *what* is repeated, but also about how the repetition of actions takes us in certain directions: we are also orientating ourselves towards some objects more than others, including not only physical objects… but also objects of thought, feeling, and judgement, as well as objects in the sense of aims, aspirations, objectives" (p. 56). If repetition is a key component of the production of suspense and affectivity in the pro wrestling match and in the performance genre, then it is important to consider how discursive repetition and citation on shoot interview podcasts are also key techniques in which the industry is also rigged or structured.

Chapter 3

Getting the Gimmick Over: The Material Rigging of Pro Wrestling

"No one cared when I was just a good wrestler."
-AEW wrestler Danhausen speaking about his gimmick to Conan O'Brien (Team Coco, 2021)

"The gimmick," Brian Jansen (2021) tells us, "is central to professional wrestling, its elastic contours encompassing the realistic, the supernatural, even the patently preposterous." It is a multivalent term, referring to wrestlers' personas, costumes, merchandise, match stipulations, weaponized objects used during matches, and mechanisms that have been altered to perform particular effects, such as a table devised to break more easily. On March 17, 2021 All Elite Wrestling (AEW) wrestlers Thunder Rosa and Britt Baker wrestled in an "unsanctioned lights out" main event match that offers an exceptional example of the proliferation of gimmicks in pro wrestling ("AEW Dynamite," 2021). During the match, extravagant, bedazzled ring attire caught the stage lights. The babyface Rosa cut her own face to draw blood and sell a performed hit to the face as real. Baker, the real-life practicing dentist, pulled on a black latex glove to apply her finishing move "The Lock Jaw" on Rosa. Tables, chairs, ladders, and thumbtacks were used as weapons that spectacularized pain, but aimed not to injure.

Figure 23-24. (Left) Screenshot of Baker and Thunder Rosa's match on YouTube (All Elite Wrestling, 2021). (Right) Screenshot of Britt Baker's "Shopaew.com" tweet (Baker [@RealBrittBaker], 2021).

Immediately after the match concluded, Baker tweeted "Shopaew.com" with an image of her bloodied face and the words "Main Event Role Model" emblazoned on a new black t-shirt available for purchase on AEW's online store (Baker [@RealBrittBaker], 2021). Although the match had been pre-taped the week before, professional wrestling's conventions of "liveness" (Auslander, 2008) and the immediacy of the tweet gave the appearance that Baker published the tweet from backstage while receiving stitches or having the remaining tacks pulled from her back.[54] Gimmicks were everywhere.

It is because of the gimmick's ubiquity in professional wrestling that it requires closer attention to understand how it works affectively, materially, and economically in the industry. In professional wrestling, the gimmick is, as cultural theorist Sianne Ngai (2020) argues, "a trick, a

[54] The t-shirt remained on Pro Wrestling Tees' (AEW's t-shirt manufacturer and distributor) Top Sellers lists for months (Pro Wrestling Tees, 2021a).

wonder, and sometimes just a thing" (p. 6). For Ngai, gimmicks are "overrated devices that strike us as working too little (labor-saving tricks), but also as working too hard (strained efforts to get our attention)" (p. 1). When we refer to something as a gimmick, we register "an uncertainty about labor—its deficiency or excess—that is always about an uncertainty about value and time" (p. 1). This rings true in pro wrestling: pro wrestlers' performances and personas can be derided as gimmicky if their performances fail to produce the feelings of realness expected of them. Yet, gimmicks are also required. They are foundational to the genre, always in service of the match's overall gimmick—its already-fixed ending—which demands that wrestlers perform a competitive match even though the winner has already been decided. In pro wrestling, gimmicks register uncertainties about value and time, and multiple, even conflicting bases of investment and attachment—we are moved by talent and accomplishment, yet just as impressed when these seem to be successfully contrived.

This chapter traces the affective and material relationships between manifestations of the gimmick persona—character, photography, gear, and merchandise—to analyze how gimmicks generate affective and monetary value for performers and promotions. To open my analysis, I outline the history of gimmicks and demonstrate how wrestlers employ the gimmick as "an unsubtle strategy for sticking out" that differentiates their "performance[s] from those of others in a world where survival depends on it" (Ngai, 2020, p. 204). The gimmick operates as a mechanism for differentiation and affiliation, which every wrestler employs for obtaining and performing work, and drawing crowd investment in the physically and financially precarious industry. I illustrate how the gimmick persona's conventions and parameters have changed as pro wrestling's performance and media contexts have shifted, and I argue that, as a result, the work required to perform a gimmick has expanded across disparate industry spaces and forms of

labour. At the same time, I investigate how identities have been reduced to costume and unpack how marginalized performers contend with being perceived as gimmicky in relation to racist, sexist, and anti-queer stereotypes, as the industry's normalizing conventions continue to position white hypermasculine wrestlers as the non-gimmicky real professional wrestlers.

This analysis sets the stage to investigate how gimmicks are produced through the ambivalent tensions between the masculine competitive work of trying to stand out, and the feminized labour and care work that participants perform to "get the gimmick over" or popular with audiences. Gimmicks demand excess work from wrestlers, and, significantly, other pro wrestling participants, who are largely unrecognized as industry workers, including photographers, gear makers, and merch sellers. In pro wrestling, only wrestlers are generally referred to as workers, and their in-ring work is prized over all other forms of labour. I argue that although a gimmick is imagined to belong to a wrestler and/or the promotion, it is produced collaboratively across various industry relationships and locations. This chapter demonstrates how gear makers, photographers, and merch makers and sellers are skilled technical labourers within the industry. In the process of creating objects and sites of affective encounter for generating value, these workers provide essential forms of labour that support and care for wrestlers and other participants in the wrestling industry.

I conclude the chapter by examining the kinds of supports and shared affinities that take shape around gimmicks, particularly the merchandise of wrestling. By purchasing merchandise, fans not only intentionally support performers, they also seek to communicate their support and their love of wrestling to promoters and other fans. Photographs, gear, and t-shirts are the affective and material "support rigging" of the professional wrestling industry. The gimmick persona—the identity built around and through the use of gimmicks—fuels and sustains the

industry's workers amidst precarity, revealing the ways that pro wrestling's affective economy is always-already "social and material, as well as psychic" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 46).

Gimmicks as Attention and Differentiation Devices

Despite how wrestlers can still be derided as gimmicky in pro wrestling, a wrestler's "'gimmick' (character and costume) [is] the most important aspect of wrestling, as 'that's what makes you money'" (Chow, 2014, p. 81). All wrestlers have gimmicks that they and promoters use to obtain bookings, create storylines, and market events, television programs, and merchandise. The gimmick is a "paradoxical necessity" (Ngai, 2020, p. 13-16). When a gimmick is "over" or popular, a wrestler does not need to hustle as much to get work. They are more likely to be booked by a promoter looking to draw a crowd to their event. A gimmick is "what one must acquire to work" and "to work indefinitely" (p. 16). When a wrestler's gimmick is over, a wrestler does not need to take as many bumps during a match to work up a crowd. The gimmick can "mitigate work's harmful effects: its wearing down of the body" (p. 16).[55] Developing a gimmick persona is always in service of working as a wrestler.

Gimmicks have long operated as devices for differentiating between wrestlers and building affiliation between audiences and individual wrestlers. Broadly speaking, there have been three phases of gimmicks that coincide with pro wrestling's expanding performance/media conventions from individual live local event to televised programs and the multimedia cultural world. In the early twentieth century, gimmick personas first took shape alongside the formation of professional wrestling as a live sporting event at carnivals and local halls. Wrestlers took on roles as heels or faces in matches and their personas would often overlap with these roles. As historian Scott Beekman (2006) explains, "For wrestling, a sport lacking home teams or an

[55] Brian Jansen (2021) also makes this connection to Ngai's discussion and gimmicks in pro wrestling.

established ‘season,’ the development of personas was an essential aspect for drawing fans to matches in which they had no [initial] vested, personal interest” (p. 64). Ring names or nicknames in advertisements and newspapers acted as cues for affiliation or dislike based on ethnic, cultural, or national lines. Many promoters tapped into “anti-foreigner sentiments” to ascribe otherness to wrestlers from cultural groups that were different to those dominant within the paying audience. For example, North American promotions billed a number of international and recent immigrant wrestlers as “Terrible Turks” from the late 1890s to the 1930s (Beekman, 2006; Hatton, 2016). Yet, audiences did not always follow the intended lines of affiliation. In Manitoba, promoters largely framed non-Anglo-Canadians as undesirable villains to varying results (Hatton, 2016, p. 174). Canadian-born Jack Taylor faced off against the “The Polish Idol” Stanislaus Zbyszko in 1922 in front of three thousand Winnipeg spectators. However, accounts in the *Winnipeg Tribune* noted the “large following” of both wrestlers, suggesting that Winnipeg’s Polish population felt more affinity with Zbyszko and supported him during the match, despite his framing as a heel (Hatton, 2016, p. 176). Differentiating wrestlers through gimmicks of otherness has been and continues to be situated and contextual.[56]

Ring names also differentiated and hierarchized wrestlers according to fighting styles and prowess. Although the practice of keeping kayfabe dictated that all wrestlers were publicized as legitimate fighters, particular ring names framed some wrestlers as more dangerous competitors and most worthy of attention. Ed Lewis, a trained and experienced grappler, was referred to as “The Strangler.” Later, his protégé Lou Thesz, was known as “Tetsujin” or “Ironman” in Japan after wrestling to sixty-minute draws with influential Korean-Japanese wrestler Rikidōzan in the 1950s (Djeljosevic, 2022). Lewis and Thesz’ ring names made claims to both audiences and

[56] In the months leading up to the Montreal Screwjob, Bret Hart worked as a heel during American performances, while still performing as a babyface in Canada.

promoters that aimed to get them booked on wrestling cards. To audiences, their ring names asserted their in-ring excellence. To bookers, their names attested to their lauded positions as "shooters"—real, skilled fighters who could protect any championship belt entrusted to them against non-fixed competition. Such gimmicks exalted serious, competitive, masculine wrestlers as the most important and desirable wrestlers or workers in the industry.

As pro wrestling first moved onto television in the 1940s, the hierarchy was somewhat destabilized as wrestlers with more theatrical gimmicks began attracting large audiences, particularly women (Dell, 2006). Rather than employ shooters or hookers, televised wrestling turned increasingly to charismatic performers with less or no competitive experience. At this same time, gimmicks became increasingly articulated through gear and costume. Wrestling gear shifted from the plain trunks and boots typical of shooter attire to more ornate costumes. For example, Gorgeous George, who wore elaborate, feathered and ruffled robes, became America's most popular wrestler. He dubbed himself the "Human Orchid," bleached his hair (now a quick heel identifier for male wrestlers), and entered the ring to "Pomp and Circumstance" (Beekman, 2006, p. 86). While Gorgeous George's dandy persona drew on homophobic sentiments to communicate his heel gimmick, his presentation also undermined the sporting wear associated with competitive masculinity as the ideal wrestling aesthetic.

Costumes became established as devices for expressing a wrestler's gimmick and connecting with audiences during televised broadcasts. To some degree, the costumes put feminized labour as a central audience-grabbing technique on display. Historian Chad Dell (2006) notes that television commentators described wrestling costumes in "vibrant detail" for those at home, suggesting that perceived audiences had sophisticated knowledge and appreciation for fashion (p. 22). Costumes included eye-catching gimmicks, including

"garnishes, ornaments, frills" or "inessential aesthetics devices," which are often regarded as feminine (Ngai, 2020, p. 196). In order to work, wrestlers, in turn, needed to embrace aesthetic performance and devices on a grander scale. Ric Flair continued George's tradition and adorned himself in ornate and sequined robes, which his daughter WWE wrestler Charlotte Flair continues to wear today (Fiorvanti, 2017). Feminized labour and the audiences of women that costumes attracted, therefore, played key roles in the progression to today's wrestling material and storytelling culture and labour practices.

As Vince McMahon's WWF standardized pro wrestling as a television genre on broadcast television in the 1980s and 90s, over-the-top gimmick personas became typical. Overall, the wrestlers played "their roles completely straight, the absurdity of much of the WWF's production reached the level of high camp" (Beekman, 2006, p. 125). However, costumes, which draw attention to bodies, participated in prejudiced storytelling and discriminatory structures. Wrestling gimmicks augment, emphasize, and/or exaggerate the wrestler body as a key "site of communication" that plays with and plays out social constructions of identity and embodiment (Warden, 2022a, p. 163). As Warden (2022a) explains, the wrestler body "plays with pretence and fakery, danger and risk. It can pose a challenge to assumptions about gender, sexuality, disability, age and ethnicity, but it can also perpetuate these assumptions" (p. 163). Gear and clothing enabled wrestlers to put on ethnicities and stereotypes as costume. Multiple settler wrestlers "played Indian," wearing stereotypical headdresses and buckskins that depicted Indigenous peoples as caricatures and ghosts of the past (T. King, 2017). For racialized wrestlers, the gimmicks they portrayed largely pushed them into the role of heels. Samoan wrestler Agatupu Rodney Anoaʻi wore a "mawashi" loin cloth over red or white pants, to perform as Yokozuna, a Japanese sumo wrestler. Gimmicks also propagated anti-Blackness

through exoticizing stereotypes of savagery and hypersexualization. For example, veteran wrestler Charles Wright traded his top hat and bone necklace for a fedora and gold chains to shift his gimmick from a voodoo witch doctor called Papa Shango to a pimp known as The Godfather. As heels, racialized wrestlers were less likely to be tapped as champion and received less merchandizing and promotional opportunities and income. The WWF justified racist, sexist, and anti-queer gimmicks by appealing to discourses of irony, free speech, and anti-political correctness. They suggested that anyone in wrestling or outside of wrestling culture that was offended by the depictions was, like a mark, unable to distinguish between the real and the staged (Battema & Sewell, 2005, p. 283). Media-savvy people and true fans could understand the difference.

At this same time that extravagant campy costumes and the ability to wear a gimmick on the body became standard, body-building and hyper-muscular wrestlers known as "body guys" took center stage (Chow, 2017). Their spectacular bodies themselves became gimmicks. Yet, hyper-muscular bodies do not immediately signify a hero or a villain within pro wrestling narratives. Rather, body guys traverse the role of heel and face. Chow (2017) explains that "what makes the muscular physique in wrestling so complex is that its excess of muscle… marks a form of labour" that is unproductive and "in excess of wrestling's system of representation" (p. 144). Moreover, built bodies also exceed the physical requirements of working a match. While pro wrestling matches necessitate physical strength and agility, the recent dynamic performances by small wrestlers, such as Riho and Marko Stunt, who are both under five-foot-two and weigh less than one hundred and twenty pounds, and the long history of fat wrestlers, including Dusty Rhodes, expose the hyper-masculine "built body" as more aesthetic than utilitarian.[57] Rather

[57] Debates that centre on Stunt's size have also taken shape around the believability of his performances.

body guys "wear evidence of thousands of hours of labour in the flesh" that is not required for the in-ring theatrics or labour. Thus, their bodies "seem gimmicky" (p. 150). Their bodies are "fundamentally gratuitous yet strangely essential" to the genre (Ngai, 2020, p. 6).

Yet, despite this gimmickiness, "the brute force and excessive violence of huge, white superstars" became equated with "idealized masculinity" and the ideal wrestler (Serrato, 2005, p. 235). By visualizing strength and competitiveness, the spectacular, white, hyper-muscular body recuperates the realness and exceptionality associated to the shooter figure. They are gimmicky in the right way. The rise and idealization of hyper-muscular, masculine, white superstars limited "the range of acceptable meanings for masculinity available for public consideration and consumption" and the career opportunities for racialized and other marginalized wrestlers (Serrato, 2005, p. 235). Likewise, it further entangled the tensions between gimmicks, costume, embodiment, and identity.

Wrestlers today continue to navigate these tensions both during television broadcasts and across other sites of mediatization and work, including podcasts, social media, and merchandise tables. With the popularization of reality television and arrival of social media, wrestlers' gimmicks increasingly draw on their real-life identities (Jeffries, 2019a; Laine, 2019a). Overall, "the characters seem to emerge from the wrestler and are not quite so, well, gimmicky" (Laine, 2019a, p. 85).[58] Instead, wrestlers often appear as authentic, if not amplified and branded, versions of themselves.

Those wrestlers whose identities and embodiments do not cite the white, hypermasculine wrestler norm are still more likely to be framed derogatorily as gimmicks or cheap attention

[58] McMahon's WWF leaned into the campy gimmick for his televised spectacles in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Performers took on props and professions along with their personas, including Paul Bearer, a mortician who carried around a brass urn which controlled highly popular wrestler The Undertaker.

grabs within pro wrestling performances.[59] When describing on *Talk is Jericho* how he built his heel "stable" or team, the "Inner Circle," for All Elite Wrestling's debut TNT episode in 2019, industry veteran Chris Jericho states that he resisted suggestions to include established masked luchadores "Lucha Brothers" Pentagon and Rey Fenix because "it's too gimmicky." He reiterates: "I don't want gimmicks" (Jericho, 2020d, 5:58). Although Jericho does not specify what makes the Lucha Brothers too gimmicky in this instance, Sharon Mazer (1998) found some American wrestlers to be "dismissive of luchadores" because the "balletic performance" of their in-ring work was "too fake" (p. 67, 171). Costume might also play a role. Phillip Serrato (2005) suggests that luchadores' "showy" attire marked them as excessive and "non-masculine" (p. 247). Instead, Jericho took up another suggestion to have New York-Puerto Rican tag team Santana and Ortiz join the Inner Circle. He cites their "thug look" as what he was looking for in his group (Jericho, 2020d, 8:25). Jericho does not dismiss luchador work overall, but his comments troublingly suggest that he finds Santana and Ortiz' brawling fight style and street-style aesthetic, which includes bandanas as headbands and cargo shorts or work pants, "less gimmicky" than Pentagon and Fenix's luchador attire. Santana and Ortiz's personas, which intersect with racist stereotypes of Latino men, are not immediately recognized as theatrical performance, or at the very least, are understood as more believable and thus less gimmicky.

Femme aesthetics and identities are also framed more often as gimmicky: "deemed inauthentic or fake, especially in relation to naturalized masculinity" in pro wrestling (Schwartz, 2020, n.p.). All Elite Wrestler Sonny Kiss, who is genderfluid, used both she and he pronouns during her time at AEW. She dresses in femme gear, and contends with how she has "such a unique gimmick" (Jericho, 2020e, 6:35). "Gimmick" in these pro wrestling conversations refers

[59] Former wrestler and WWE producer Michael Hayes has been credited with stating that "black wrestlers don't need gimmicks because being black *is* their gimmick" (Shoemaker, 2014, p. 138).

to her onscreen performances, where she wrestles in the men's division, but their mark of "uniqueness" throws her gender presentation into the conversation of her wrestling work in the hypermasculine industry. In an interview with *The Undefeated*, Kiss describes resisting pro wrestling's hyper-masculine aesthetics and normative standards: "I knew going into this business, I was gonna either do it authentically or not at all. Authentically, what I mean by that is just straight up who I am, I wasn't going to pretend… I wasn't going to cater to the hyper-masculine standards, I was going to just be me and if I couldn't do that, I wasn't going to do it at all" (Sam, 2021).

Kiss' statement articulates how gender-fluid embodiments and identities can be read as gimmicky, unserious, or inauthentic in pro wrestling. Although Kiss's presentation differentiates her from other wrestlers in the men's division, it also marginalizes her. Despite being one of AEW's first signees in 2019, Kiss did not appear on AEW's flagship television program *Dynamite* after October 2020 and her last TV appearance saw her squashed in a one-minute match by a newly-signed white, hyper-muscular wrestler. She was released in late 2023. Being labeled a gimmick wrestler— or just needing to reiterate that one is not a gimmick wrestler or that one's gender presentation is not a gimmick—has detrimental effects.[60] "Gimmick wrestlers," like gimmick matches, such as ladder matches or death matches, are seen as excessive to and deviant from the standard match and therefore limited on wrestling programs. The white

[60] In an interview with Jericho, Nyla Rose, who is the first open trans woman signed to a major wrestling promotion, explains that she is grateful to be signed to AEW based on her talent and work. In his response, Jericho notes that she was not signed as a gimmick (Jericho, 2020a, 28:45). While Jericho is supportive of Rose's wrestler pedigree, based on her training in Japan, his comment also reveals how Rose's identity as a trans woman makes her more likely to be framed as a "gimmick wrestler" or not a serious wrestler like those that fit the dominant model. Indie wrestler Billy Dixon, who is Black, queer, and fat, describes how if he is booked on the card, there likely will not be another wrestler who shares his embodiment or identity on the card, while multiple matches will feature athletic white men (Shorey & Alan, 2020). They are treated as an excessive gimmick.

hypermasculine norm positions their identities and embodiments as additional or in excess of the genre.

While I do not ignore the ways that the racist, sexist, anti-trans and anti-queer representations that have circulated, and continue to be produced and communicated in professional wrestling, particularly in the form of gimmicks, I aim to shift the focus from the performance and production of harmful stereotypical gimmicks and instead think through the ways that gimmicks enable and rely on work and care in the industry, while also noting that further research is needed to attend to how gear makers participated and participate in the construction of racist, anti-queer, anti-fat, and sexist gimmicks.

Living Gimmicks

The gimmick over-promises both more work and less effort. It promises that wrestlers with well-formed gimmicks will receive more income opportunities without having to do the work to find such jobs or income sources. However, pro wrestling's expansion from an individual live event to an always-already-ongoing media and cultural machine demands that wrestlers work their gimmicks across various platforms and sites. The effort required to get and keep a gimmick over has likewise expanded. Wrestlers now perform their gimmicks as part of a narrative strategy for in-ring performances *and* as a branding and merchandizing strategy. As the curtain of kayfabe has been pulled back to reveal more of the performers behind the gimmicks, the gimmicks have become more entangled with the wrestlers *and* companies where they work (Laine, 2019a). I touched on this process last chapter as I described how The Elite document their everyday lives while wearing their own merchandise on their YouTube show as part of developing a "branded 'self'" (Hearn, 2008, 2010). Gimmicks are now "sutured" to wrestlers, monetized, and protected through contracts and intellectual property laws that protect a

wrestler's "likeness" (Laine, 2019a, pp. 82–84). "Professional wrestling," as Laine (2019a) argues, "takes such legal understandings as foundational to its business model, trademarking and copyrighting wrestlers' images, names, and even gestures" (p. 82). As a result, wrestlers have become or acquire "living gimmicks," which they use to make their bodies and personas "saleable apart from the moment of live performance" (p. 80, 82).

The economic and cultural power of trademarking enables wrestlers and promoters to monetize and capitalize on wrestlers' gimmicks and use material iterations of the gimmick as another facet for drawing audience affiliation and investment. Although Gorgeous George sold gold-plated "Georgie" hair pins as early as the 1950s, merchandizing gimmicks became a key industry dynamic and money-making avenue in the 1980s (Beekman, 2006, p. 87, 126-127). To coincide with his Saturday morning program *Hulk Hogan's Rock 'n' Wrestling*, McMahon targeted school-age children, encouraging them to envelop themselves in WWF. By 1988, WWF had made 200 million dollars in merchandizing sales on everything from "pajamas to bedsheets, to toothbrushes, lunch boxes, books, and toys" (p. 127). WWE, AEW, and individual wrestlers also all clearly target adult consumers just as heavily—if not more—than children, as evidenced in the variety and amount of adult size clothing and branded coffee and alcohol.

Today, Pro Wrestling Tees, which is based in Chicago, is a key player in solidifying the t-shirt as an essential gimmick in the current pro wrestling economy. Originally birthed in 2010 out of a print-to-order store, One Hour Tees, CEO Ryan Barkin developed relationships with indie wrestlers, beginning with Colt Cabana and later Matt and Nick Jackson. Pro Wrestling Tees began supplying t-shirts for the wrestlers to sell at events and then established ProWestlingTees.com, an online store, which acts as an always-already-open merch table where

fans can purchase wrestlers' t-shirts between events.[61] Pro Wrestling Tees espouses the economic and affective promises of merch selling on their website and social media by describing the ways in which wrestlers have made money from their partnership with Pro Wrestling Tees. The site features over 1200 wrestlers and promotions on its online store, and proclaims that the company has paid over six-million dollars in royalties to wrestlers through a fifty-fifty profit split (Pro Wrestling Tees, *About us*, n.d.; Jericho, 2018d, 54:55). Wrestlers can upload designs or commission designs from Pro Wrestling Tees and therefore control how their gimmick is articulated and produced. And, they can reap the benefits of the sales.

The t-shirt gimmick promises of income outside the temporal and spatial bounds of the wrestling ring, but it requires additional forms of representational, emotional, and relational labour so that wrestlers can capitalize on and extract more value from their in-ring performance. In a promotional YouTube video produced by Pro Wrestling Tees, Cody Rhodes suggests that "with Ryan it's a complete personal touch" and, because t-shirts are made to order, wrestlers can take risks with their designs and gimmicks (Pro Wrestling Tees, 2019). Care and support enable risk and creativity. These aspects of wrestler control and income are widely known in pro wrestling culture and contribute to a sense of authenticity associated to Pro Wrestling Tees. Yet, as the video progresses, the descriptions of Barkin's ongoing availability to wrestlers and AEW Chief Marketing and Merchandizing Officer Dana Massie bring to light the tensions between how selling merch might promise less effort but demand more.

At the same time, the trademark is just one more gimmick operating in the professional wrestling industry. It is the gimmick's gimmick that enables wrestlers to commodify their

[61] Similar to the ways that wrestlers point to their love of pro wrestling as legitimating their work in the industry, Pro Wrestling Tees and wrestlers with a vested interest in the company brand it with the discourse of love. Barkin states that "Pro wrestling tees is run by pro wrestling fans" (Pro Wrestling Tees, 2019), suggesting that their emotional investment in or love for pro wrestling enables better production of designs and t-shirts.

characters, bodies, and labour as personal and promotional brands. While historically trademarks offered guarantees of quality and authenticity to the purchasing public, the trademark now protects the seller from infringement by those who seek to use their name or intellectual property without permission (Gaines, 1991, p. 211). "Merchandise licensing ventures," Jane Gaines (1991) explains, "depend completely on the protectability of the trademark; it is the legal shield around the name, logo, shape, or character image, making it possible for the original proprietor to assign this sign to second and third parties for a limited period of time in exchange for royalties" (p. 214). Yet, the trademark itself needs to be negotiated and protected. It demands work from wrestlers and other industry workers.

Wrestlers' accounts of obtaining and selling trademarks demonstrate how the relationships between the trademark and the gimmick persona are fraught with struggles of control between promotions and wrestlers. Speaking on *Talk is Jericho*, The Elite's Matt and Nick Jackson claim that they attempted to trademark "Bullet Club," their highly-popular New Japan Pro-Wrestling "stable" or team (Jericho, 2018b). At the time of the interview, Bullet Club had the highest selling t-shirts on ProWrestlingTees.com, the largest wrestling merchandise producer outside of WWE (Jericho, 2018b, 39:10). Significantly, the Jacksons did not come up with Bullet Club. Wrestler Prince Devitt (known now as Finn Balor in WWE) started and named the stable, but never trademarked it. In the Jacksons' account, New Japan barely beat them to trademarking it. (Jericho, 2018b). Both the Jacksons and New Japan sought to use the trademark to control and capitalize on the way that fans expressed affective investment in Bullet Club by purchasing t-shirts, despite neither originating the name or group.

For the tag team FTR, trademarks were a negotiation point in obtaining their contract

release from WWE in 2020.[62] Known then as The Revival, Dax Harwood and Cash Wheeler (Scott Dawson and Dash Wilder in WWE) trademarked many of their move names and catchphrases while in WWE. Dissatisfied with their position in the company, the two wrestlers began to request their release, which they were refused repeatedly. Eventually, WWE made a counter offer to the wrestlers. They could sign over The Revival trademarks in exchange for early release (Paquette, 2022). By relinquishing The Revival trademarks, Harwood and Wheeler were able to leave the company. However, they had to develop a new gimmick in FTR—which perhaps stands for Fuck the Revival—to use at AEW and on the indies. By losing control of one gimmick, they gained control of another. However, selling the trademarks to WWE required them to create new names for (and trademark again) all of the details that make up a gimmick persona, including a tag team name, persona names, move names, gear, and logos—all details that end up on merch.

Moreover, although FTR sell an enormous amount of merch on Pro Wrestling Tees, it is unclear if they benefit from the fifty-fifty deal. Pro Wrestling Tees produces and distributes AEW's merchandise through their website and ShopAEW.com.

[62] WWE typically changes and trademarks a wrestler's gimmick name upon their arrival, giving them more power to shape a wrestler's character and place within the company. Should a wrestler leave the company, they will usually revert back to their previous indie gimmick name or choose a new one.

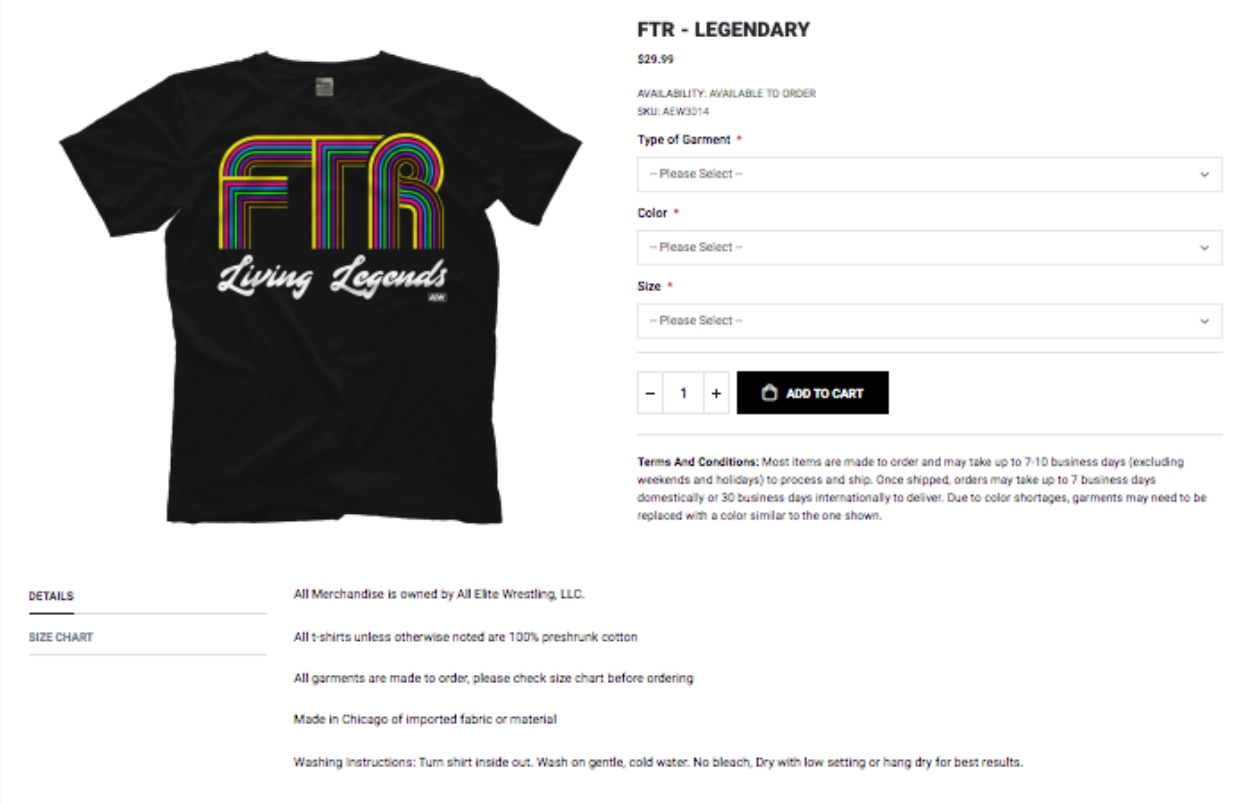

Figure 25. Screenshot of FTR's "Legendary" t-shirt on ProWrestlingTees.com (Pro Wrestling Tees, *FTR-Legendary*, n.d.).

While merchandise listed on Pro Wrestling Tees prior to a wrestler's signing with AEW is listed as owned by the wrestler, merchandise produced while a wrestler is under contract shows as being owned by All Elite Wrestling, LLC. This suggests that wrestlers' merch royalty shares might be negotiated through their AEW contracts. While they may control their gimmicks, they might not benefit as much from their gimmick sales.

Pro wrestling gimmicks are living gimmicks, because like the pro wrestling genre more broadly, they are always in process, being performed, articulated, rearticulated, and encountered. As an attention-grabbing strategy or device, they require ongoing attention, maintenance, and work.

Gimmicks of Support and Care

The last section demonstrated how pro wrestling gimmicks operate as strategies of

differentiation and affiliation that strain for attention, and promise that wrestlers with gimmicks can spend less time trying to obtain work, more time reaping its benefits. I illustrated how the gimmick actually demands more work, especially for marginalized wrestlers. In this second half of the chapter, I focus on how gimmicks are embedded in material forms, circulate in promotional materials and merchandise, and drive affective and monetary interest back to the wrestlers and their promotion. I retain my interest in gimmicky work, but argue that gimmicks are also sites of care and support work that are often underrecognized.

Care work in wrestling is obscured for two reasons. First, non-wrestlers often perform the work of care and support for wrestlers and wrestling, and their work isn't recognized as labour in the same way that wrestlers' work is understood as work. Only wrestlers are referred to as workers in the industry. As a reminder, "good workers" or "technicians" in pro wrestling are especially good performers who are understood to have mastered the technical skills for working a match and a crowd. Here pro wrestling culture intersects with maker and tech cultures. As scholars have noted, "who is recognized as a maker" or worker "is intimately related to gendered understandings of different kinds of technical labor" and "what forms of techné are seen as valuable" (Rentschler, 2019, p. 134). Second, this work often takes place outside the ring and in forms of emotional labour and feminized labour, which are understood as "non [wrestling] work" (Weeks, 2011). "Mainstream maker culture still often undervalues technologies" that are gendered female, "such as textiles and sewing implements" (Rentschler, 2019, p.134), while domestic and feminized tasks, including "hostessing" and other forms of emotional and "relational labour" (Baym, 2018; Cornfeld, 2018) have long gone unrecognized or underrecognized as essential forms of work in capitalist production (Ngai 2020, p. 343).

I interviewed wrestlers, merch sellers, a photographer, and a gear maker and analyzed

media depictions of gimmick production to examine the practices of making and selling that animate gimmicks and their performance in the industry. My analysis demonstrates how support and care get expressed in and through material production of gimmicks and their purchases. I investigate the following questions: How do wrestlers acquire and construct their gimmick and employ it in their work and to access their work? Who performs the work and what types of work are performed to enable wrestlers' work? How is support offered and expressed? The answers to these questions reveal how gimmicks are not only sites of capitalization, but sites of affective encounter and movement that rely on ongoing work, expertise, and care—often from unrecognized workers—in the industry.

Capturing the Gimmick: Body Images

Despite the cultural convention that wrestlers or the companies they work for "own" their individual gimmick personas, gimmicks are constructed collaboratively. Photographers, gear makers, and merch sellers all work with wrestlers to create "a visible construction" (Hebdige, 1979) that intentionally communicates a wrestler's gimmick and can help a wrestler get over with an audience. Their accounts of their work shed light on the extensive labour, care, physical effort, and expertise they perform and the ways that labour is often not identified as such.[63]

Like the kayfabe narratives that string together matches and build interest in wrestlers between events, the process of visualizing a gimmick is ongoing and necessary to get and keep a gimmick over. Ottawa-based indie wrestling photographer Jason Barker supports this process by

[63] Ring announcers also co-construct a wrestler's gimmick verbally by announcing wrestlers with their gimmick names and catchphrases. PCW ring announcer Josh Hammerstein explains that he keeps a notebook where he writes down any specific things that the promotion's regular wrestlers want to have said about them when they enter the ring. For example, for one heel wrestler, Hammerstein has declared that the wrestler "insists that I say to you that he is the most handsome man" when he announces the wrestler's entrance to the crowd (J. Hammerstein, personal communication, February 15, 2021). Such details can emphasize a wrestler as a self-aggrandizing heel and require detail work from ring announcers such as Hammerstein. It is also important to note that "Hammerstein" is also a gimmick name and persona. Ring announcers also construct their own characters through dress and performance.

visually recording their gimmicks for promotional circulation. His work takes place with wrestlers before, during, and after events and the photos he produces circulate online in social media posts, paper bulletin boards as event posters, and 8x10 prints that wrestlers sell at event merch tables. Photographs which capture a wrestlers' gimmick serve two key purposes. First, as Winnipeg's WrestleMax promoter Curtis Howson and New York's Uncanny Attractions' Darnell Mitchell note, promoters value when a wrestler can quickly provide them with photos that they can use to promote their upcoming events (C. Howson, personal communication, February 9, 2021; D. Mitchell, personal communication, March 4, 2021). If a wrestler can provide good images quickly and easily, this will be remembered, and the wrestler is more likely to be booked again. Second, photos are commodities that wrestlers can sell to their fans for income and to materialize themselves in their fan's everyday and affective lives.

At the same time as Barker's work participates in the materialization of a wrestler's gimmick, it also stimulates interest in the indie promotion's events. Barker, who is paid by the promotions for his work, provides wrestlers with photographs and posts his photos to the promotions' social media accounts. By offering his services at small local events where emerging wrestlers are already booked, Barker provides an opportunity for less well-known wrestlers, wrestling students, and those new to the business to construct and promote their gimmicks for local audiences as well as outside promoters and audiences who might see the images online. Photographs that mediate and materialize a wrestler's gimmick support a wrestler in obtaining more work.

Pro wrestlers rely on photographers' energy and expertise to capture their bodies in ways that communicate their gimmicks. Much of photographers' work takes place backstage or in their homes, out of sight of paying fans, who often extol wrestlers' labour and effort as key to their

investment in pro wrestling. When shooting an event, Barker arrives early, bringing his camera, backdrop, and lights with him. Although it does not take long to set up, taking wrestlers' promotional shots requires Barker to wait around backstage for the wrestlers. He invests his time. When photographers shoot matches, they exert energy and rely on their photography and pro wrestling expertise to position themselves correctly around the ring so that they can shoot key physical moments in the match. Barker draws on knowledge that he's developed from watching hours of wrestling as a fan. He describes: "I feel like I watched so much wrestling that I can kinda tell the way a match is gonna go… I can see something setting up. He's gonna go to that corner. And, literally, I'll run over to that corner and wait" (J. Barker, personal communication, February 10, 2021). As I explained in Chapter One, non-wrestler participants read and feel through the interval of a match to anticipate possible actions or outcomes. While outside the ring, photographers work with wrestlers, engaging in the match's procedures of delay and renewal to catch key affective and physically dynamic moments that capture a wrestler's gimmick. Yet, without knowing a match's plan or finish, photographers must engage in a practice of "working loose" that leaves room for not only what they imagine might happen, but what does happen.

In addition to exhibiting work and expertise, photographers' work also expresses care for the wrestlers that they photograph, care that gets articulated through the attention they put into *how* they photograph wrestlers and choosing shots that portray them well. Photographers work continues well after the events they shoot as they go through the process of editing and curating photographs. For each wrestling event, Barker parses through four to six hundred images, and chooses the most aesthetically-pleasing images that best highlight the wrestlers and their performances. Barker notes that he pays careful attention to what they are doing. He states that the ways that wrestlers stand and position their bodies evoke their gimmick personas. Former

indie and feminist wrestler Kate Bundy echoes Barker's assessment, declaring that "the wrestling body is about being visibly understood. It's the look, but it's also what you're doing and why" (K. Bundy, personal communication, February 5, 2021). When asked what he looks for in an image from a match, Barker explains: "Good facial expressions really help. I delete a lot of weird faces, cuz you know they're running around, they're sweating, their mouths are open, they don't look that photogenic. Those ones most likely won't see the light of day" (J. Barker, personal communication, February 10, 2021). Barker's account demonstrates an ethic of care for the wrestlers that he photographs. Photographers recognize that their images play a role in gimmick persona construction and publicity and that unattractive or embarrassing photos could have a detrimental effect on a wrestler. By capturing wrestlers with effort, expertise, and care, photographers produce affective and monetary value for promotions and wrestlers.

Materializing the Gimmick: Gearing Up

Developing and acquiring gear is key to embodying a gimmick. Wrestlers, like porn workers (another set of precarious performers), almost always bear the cost of body maintenance, including the costs of gear, hair, and make-up (Berg, 2021, p. 15). Indie wrestlers tend to invest more in training, gear, and development than they will receive in compensation (Chow, 2014, p. 85).[64] Winnipeg-based indie wrestler A.J. Sanchez estimates that to "gear up" with a singlet, pads, and boots can cost approximately a thousand dollars (A. Sanchez, personal communication, February 15, 2021). Gear works hard to get attention but does not bring in enough income. If Ngai's critique is correct that when we appraise something as a gimmick we evaluate it as economically and aesthetically cheap, this judgement of cheapness both reveals and obscures the gimmick's utility and its financial costs and investments.

[64] For Chow (2014), it is this discrepancy that distinguishes "amateur" or indie wrestling as a labour of love.

In professional wrestling, the financial cost of the gimmick includes wrestlers' economic investment in costumes and gear, and gear makers' investment of labour, time, skill, and care. Attending to the processes of materializing gimmicks in gear and costume acquisition brings into view what a gimmick enables and also what needs to be done to get a gimmick. Gear is a major aspect of how a wrestler's gimmick is articulated. While Nonini and Teraoke (1992) argue that a "wrestler has no tools or machinery, but only [their] body to work with" (p. 162), gear plays key technical, material, aesthetic, and affective roles in enabling pro wrestling performances. Gear is a site of encounter between wrestlers and gear makers, between wrestlers working a match, and between wrestlers and audiences.

The lightweight stretchy fabric SPANDEX, which is one of the most common materials for wrestling gear, epitomizes gear and the gimmick's uses. SPANDEX is an anagram for "expands." The name draws attention to its material function during matches and to its narrative and theatrical function in pro wrestling. Gear bolsters and aggrandizes a wrestler's gimmick—their character and physical presence on the stage. It enables labour, as I will illustrate shortly. It allows a wrestler to touch an audience by creating a character with whom an audience might connect. The SPANDEX textile "is an extension of the skin, but the skin is not only what delineates [the wrestler] from the world, what encloses [the wrestler]. It is also porous, breathing, that is to say; it enables the outside—the air, a touch—to penetrate" the wrestler (Langlois, 2022, p. 70). Or to put it another way, it supports an individual gimmick persona, and at the same time, affords connection and affiliation between wrestlers and fans.

Yet, getting a gimmick takes effort and knowledge about what types of costume and gear work best for a wrestler's gimmick, embodiment, and performance style. Pro wrestlers' narratives about early performances without gear attest to the role that it plays in the construction

of a persona and the physical labour of the match. New wrestlers are generally not well informed as to how to acquire equipment or costumes. They are taught how to perform in-ring work, not work outside the ring. In her first performance, Bundy did not wear any pads. Doing the work made her realize that she needed the protection. She added knee pads and elbow pads to her gear set. Sanchez remembers, "I didn't know what wrestling gear was. I didn't know what boots were. I think I started wearing t-shirt, jean shorts, and just like the worst shoes in the world" (A. Sanchez, personal communication, February 15, 2021). He explains that it took a couple years for someone to take him aside and explain what type of gear he should be wearing. His first set of boots were a pair of hand-me-downs, purchased off another wrestler. Acquiring gear requires knowledge and money that wrestlers must put forth.

Not just any gear will do. To fulfill the aesthetic and narrative roles that gimmicks play, wrestlers and gear makers envision how they can express a wrestler's gimmick to the crowd through costume and gear. Pravina Shukla (2015) explains, "There is an implicit persona that the costume permits its wearer to assume… costume functions to help individuals elect, embrace, and display special identities that are not expressed through daily dress" (p. 5). Costume and gear distinguish a wrestler as a heel or face, and offer cues to the affective tone or genre of their matches or performances—comedic, horror-inspired, or brawling. Mitchell, who works in the fashion industry as well as promoting, notes the essential work that gear does: "I always say people's wardrobes—because I am a stylist—[are] so important… In the first five seconds I need to recognize who you are and what you're doing. And that makes me care about you" (D. Mitchell, personal communication, March 4, 2021).[65] Gear must communicate the gimmick persona to the audience. It is a mechanism for affiliation between wrestlers and audiences.

[65] Mitchell states that the term influencer has been given to him, it was not one that he initially granted himself.

Understanding and creating gear for a gimmick can be a challenging process that requires the knowledge and resources to acquire it. Those with clear visions of their gimmick, like Bundy, cobble their gear together from different sites. For her gimmick, Amazona Prime (an anti-capitalist cyborg), Bundy cobbled together her gear from a Halloween store, thrift store, swapping gear backstage with other wrestlers, and, ironically, from Amazon. When she added the pads to her costume, the bulkiness of the pads actually contributed to the robot-ness of her character. Bundy describes how her costume and persona evolved and changed over time. She wore a silver leotard that became progressively rustier looking each time she washed the gear, feeding into her gimmick's themes of capitalism's destruction and decay (K. Bundy, personal communication, February 5, 2021).

Yet, not all wrestlers find it easy to navigate this process. Maryland-based indie wrestler Faye Jackson describes on the podcast *Wrestlesplania* that it took her two years to find a gear maker and, at one point, she enlisted a friend to make her gear. However, because her friend knew nothing about wrestling, Jackson had to explain the specific items, such as kick pads, and their in-ring demands (Millman & Barbadoro, 2019a). To some degree, having someone to make the gear did not resolve the challenges of obtaining good gear. Similarly, Sanchez, who is approximately six feet tall and weighs over three hundred pounds, explains:

> You're a large man and you're in SPANDEX in front of people. It took me a while to get comfortable… when I first started wrestling it was a lot of shorts and shirts and, you know, just lazy not really wrestling gear type stuff. Because I didn't know or know anybody to kind of get those things done… and I just went full on to the wrestling singlet… as far as design and stuff, I am horrible at picking out designs… I'll tell the seamstress whatever you think, just because I don't know. And it's kinda tough for them

> sometimes when they don't know who your character is… I'll always try to make sure that my name's on it (A. Sanchez, personal communication, February 15, 2021).

Sanchez's comments point to difficulties some wrestlers face when trying to find gear makers or when translating their gimmicks to those who design and sew gear. Gear makers need to recognize a wrestler's gimmick as much as a wrestling audience and the wrestler needs to be able to communicate their gimmick to the maker. Further, Sanchez points to the ways that those with larger-than-normative bodies face internal and external challenges around expectations about how larger-than-normative bodies should be clothed and displayed in public. Broader social conceptions complicate gimmick production for marginalized wrestlers.

Gear Making

Gear making not only produces material items for wrestlers. It is a key form of reproductive labour and care work that makes pro wrestling work possible (Berg, 2021, p. 152). Recent narratives and social media posts from pro wrestling gear makers, including Kel Rose and Val Quartz, bring the technological skills and work required to produce gear into view. Their online demonstrations illustrate how gear makers work with wrestlers to articulate wrestlers' gimmicks and rig wrestlers out with care. Kel Rose is a seasoned seamstress with twenty-eight years of sewing experience, fifteen of those spent at costume shops. She began making her wife Nyla Rose's gear once Nyla signed with AEW in 2019.

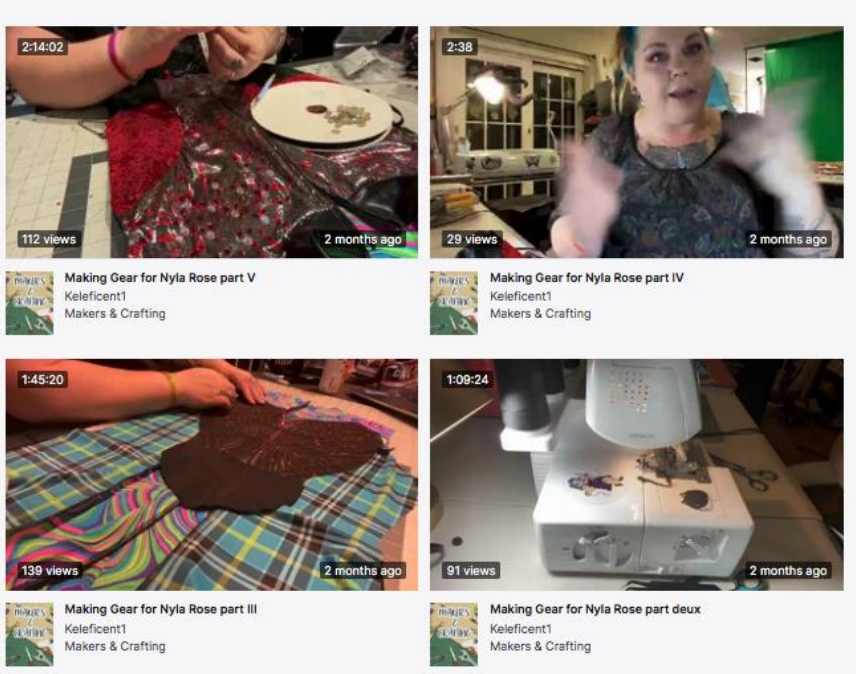

Figure 26. Screenshot of Kel Rose's video thumbnails on her Twitch page (K. Rose, 2021b).

In 2021, Kel Rose streamed eight Twitch videos from her sewing studio. The live stream lasted for over ten and a half hours, over the course of which she explains and shows the work required to create a new set of gear for her wife. This work requires extensive knowledge and highly skilled techniques. The time required to make a set of gear can vary from four hours to over twenty hours, depending on how elaborate it is, and each set of gear requires similar prep work, including pinning, making patterns, cutting, shopping, drafting, planning, and designing (K. Rose, 2021a). The duration and quantity of videos publicizes the time commitment and complex processes required of gear makers, showing the number and variety of tasks required in gear making. Like wrestling training and match performance, such work is also repetitive. Rose's videos testify to the demands of gear making and documents her as a skilled technician who performs labour in the wrestling industry.

Gear makers engage wrestlers in conversation and interpret wrestlers' narratives about themselves to produce gear that can "signal [the] different self" of a gimmick (Shukla, 2015, p.

3). In my 2021 interview, Valerie Quartz, who started the wrestling gear company Daryl Apparel that same year, described how she begins creating gear for a wrestler:

> First, I just go over their name, what kind of gear they're looking for, the colour and style preferences they have in mind. And then I end in the questions I'm really interested in… tell me a little bit about your character. I ask them what their theme song is, so again, just trying to get the vibe of what's important to them… I ask for different influences that they have… people like to give me wrestlers… which is good. But what I'm *actually* even more interested in… is influences on their characters, be it, a book or tv or a movie (emphasis added, V. Quartz, personal communication, February 18, 2021).

From these conversations gear makers draw out the aesthetic and affective information they need to materialize a wrestler's gimmick. Quartz, in particular, draws out additional sources of influence from outside wrestling. In so doing, she helps wrestlers differentiate themselves from those already in the industry. They are less likely to be perceived as copying an established wrestler and, therefore, a cheap gimmick.

Quartz and Rose are both highly invested in supporting LGBTQ+ wrestlers and women wrestlers, mitigating some of the ways marginalized wrestlers can be marked as excessive in the industry. Quartz employs the information she gathers to construct gear that has personal depth for the wrestler and can position the wrestler correctly within her narrative role in performances. For Abby Jane, an independent wrestler based in Philadelphia, Quartz designed a shimmery gold and red two-piece gear set that features a doodle-like pattern on the top. Jane is a young, cute babyface and uses the catchphrase a "wrestling ray of sunshine." Quartz's gear leans into Jane's youth and sweetness to help Jane establish herself as a likeable underdog in the gritty world of independent wrestling the minute she walks out from behind the curtain. Her gear "invite[s]

others to join in" (Shukla, 2015, p. 12); it invites the audience to cheer for her. It draws affect and affiliation from the crowd that Jane can capitalize on during her performance—to give the match meaning—and through merchandise sales, such as t-shirts, where fans can express their affiliation with Jane.

Conversely, the red "bloodlike" splatter on the gear Kel Rose creates for Nyla in her Twitch videos connotes a vicious heel. Nyla's gear set includes a number of pieces, including kick pads, tasseled wristbands, and a lace headband. Nyla also wears an armband with the Hiawatha Belt of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy in honor of her Oneida identity. The Hiawatha Belt also connotes her gimmick as "The Native Beast," and because of its specificity and personal connection to her heritage, it resists the stereotypical and flattening iconography used in popular culture to identify characters as vaguely Indigenous, such as war paint or headdresses. The red hand on her loincloth is in tribute to the thousands of Indigenous women who have been murdered or disappeared in so-called North America (Deer, 2022). Overall, Rose's gear disallows harmful racist connotations of savagery, while emphasizing her gimmick as a dangerous wrestler. Both Rose's and Jane's gear sets draw on the relationships and knowledge the gear makers have with the wrestlers and seek to give their wrestlers a particular "vibe," an affective quality that will help elicit either cheers or boos from the fans respectively.

Additionally, gear makers' work and material products aid performers with the relational labour that they perform in and out of the ring by contributing to wrestlers' gimmicks. As Nancy Baym (2018) explains, drawing on Wendy Fonarow, performers know that "audiences will hold them accountable both for the 'illusion of verisimilitudes; they create and for whatever the audience imagines them to be'" (p. 179). Pro wrestlers must account for how fans perceive them and their gimmick personas. In particular, Nyla Rose's gimmick—expressed in part in her

gear—enables her to respond as a heel to anti-trans attacks online. The ability to shift into "heel mode" on social media allows her to promote her matches, sell merchandise, engage with fans, and increase her visibility as a wrestler, at the same time as she thwarts transphobic responses. After her championship win in February 2020, she tweeted "#diemadaboutit" (N. Rose [@NylaRoseBeast], 2020). As a heel, she is free to insult transphobes without worry that it will cost her economic opportunities. When she burns transphobes like this, she is doing her job—acting like a heel and promoting her championship. While Rose still faces a form of harassment that cisgender wrestlers do not have to contend with when they perform relational and promotional labour, her gear, produced from a close, personal relationship, supports her by contributing to her performance as a powerful heel in and out of the ring.

Gear Supports In-Ring Labour

Gear makers' work does not reconfigure the overall competitive and extractive industry structure. However, by producing functional costumes that wrestlers utilize to perform moves, gear makers rig the professional wrestlers they clothe in bodily support and care. During a match, wrestlers put their bodies at risk and entrust their bodies to their partners. Yet, it is not wrestlers alone who care for their bodies. Gear makers pay careful attention to wrestlers' embodiments, wrestling styles, and workrates to produce gear that will hold up and not contribute to accidents or injuries by causing irritation or distraction. Kel Rose outlines that gear makers think about what wrestlers' bodies do and accommodate their physical actions. She explains: "Wrestling gear has to function differently, has to hold up. Think about the bumps that they take, the flips that they do, the kicks, the stretching. The gear needs to be able to tolerate all of that and last and stand up" (K. Rose, 2021b).

Gear that holds up is especially important for women wrestlers who are already over

sexualized within pro wrestling culture where images and GIFs of "wardrobe malfunctions" may circulate without consent across social media. Rose makes sure to line her outfits to guarantee that the gear cannot be seen through under the bright stage lights; she also uses a surger to cut any excess fabric that might rub and cause discomfort for a wrestler (K. Rose, 2021b). By creating gear that holds up for Nyla in particular, Rose guards against the hyper-sexualization that Indigenous and Black women face and pushes back against the scrutiny and surveillance that is enacted on trans bodies. Creating this functionality—the ability to hold up—takes know-how about the work that wrestlers and fabrics do, as revealed in the moments when gear fails. Faye Jackson, Rose, and Quartz all describe their first gear sets stretching out during matches (Millman & Barbadoro, 2019a; K. Rose, 2021a; V. Quartz, personal communication, February 18, 2021). The gear did not hold up to the rigours of wrestling. They became loose and lost their shape. In response, the gear makers adjust and account for how gear expands over time.

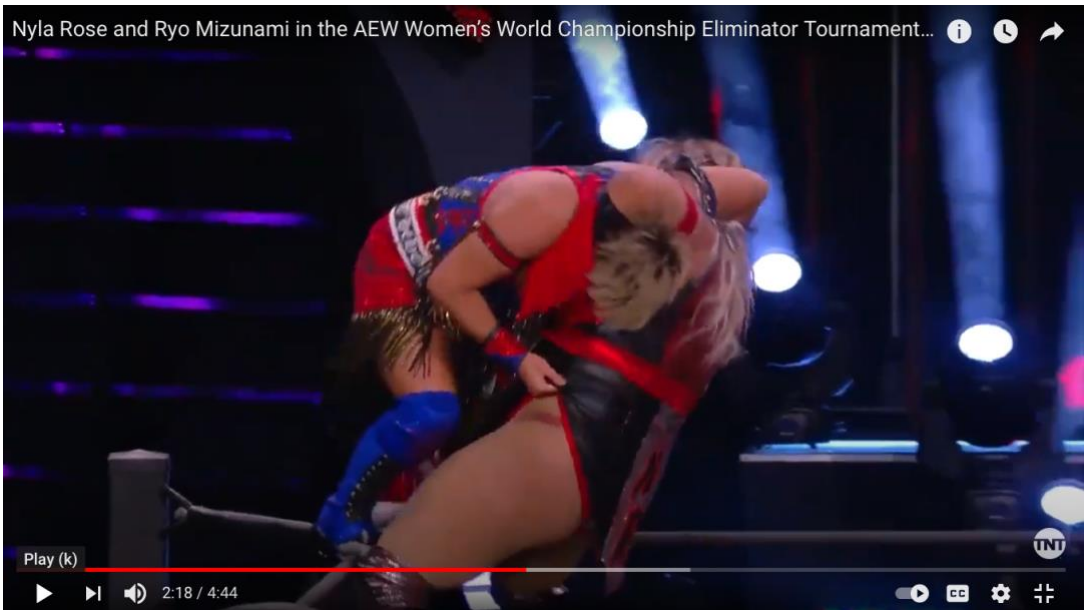

Figure 27. Screenshot of Nyla Rose suplexing Ryo Mizunami on *AEW Dynamite* (TNT, 2021).

Accounting for the fabric's give is key, because gear supports and enables wrestlers to perform particular moves in their performances. To perform moves, such as suplexes, wrestlers

grab and pull at each other's gear and use it for leverage. In Rose's 2021 *AEW Dynamite* match against Ryo Mizunami, in which she debuted her new blood splatter gear, Mizunami grabs onto Nyla's loin cloth waistband and bodice as Nyla flips her over onto the mat from the top rope (TNT, 2021). Nyla's gear must stay in place as Nyla and Mizunami complete their moves safely. As the wrestlers rely on each other, they also rely on the gear. Creating this functionality, durability, and embedded care in gear requires gear makers to take particular steps in the process of making gear. Quartz spoke of caring for bodies of wrestlers in relation to the affordances of fabric. She states that there is "no pattern or mannequin that can account for all the different types of bodies" (V. Quartz, personal communication, February 18, 2021). Rather, she must attend to and account for the different stretches in fabric, the different types of wrestler bodies, and the ways that wrestlers' bodies change over time when she makes gear. One such way that gear makers do this is by making gear that is tighter than everyday clothing (V. Quartz, personal communication, February 18, 2021). Wrestlers repeatedly tug at the waistband of each other's gear during matches. Waistbands, therefore, must be snug—while still fitting the wrestlers—so that as the stretch in the SPANDEX gives throughout the match, it will continue to stay in place. Gear makers bring expertise and experience to make adjustments that will account for the wrestlers' bodies and movement. Their work occurs far from the ring, although the gear is put to work in the match.

Yet, like wrestlers who bear the costs of gear and bodily maintenance, gear makers make investments in making gear and face economic and physical costs in the process of gear making. Often gear makers do this work in addition to their full-time jobs. Their wrestling work is in excess of their everyday work. Quartz works in child care and education. Rose works as a school bus driver. When they make gear, they work out of a love for wrestling and sewing. And, in

Rose's case, it helped to cut down on the enormous costs of gear for her wife when she was signed to a television wrestling program (K. Rose, 2021a). Making gear requires substantial financial investment. Quartz, who had only recently begun making gear when I spoke to her, talked about how the initial start-up of her business required significant investment in sewing equipment. Not unlike wrestling, it also comes with physical costs. While cutting a piece of fabric on her Twitch video, Kel Rose notes that she uses a rotary cutter, because it's easier on the hands, thus pointing to the ways that the repetitive physical work of gear making has detrimental effects on the body. While there are many ways in which the costs and investments or in-ring work and gear making are incommensurate, there are also many similarities between the work practices, practices of care, investments, and costs.

Selling the Gimmick: The T-shirt as Gimmick

Wrestlers also articulate their gimmicks outside the ring through material commodities, particularly t-shirts, which act as "wearable texts" (Litherland et al., 2020) that circulate their images, catchphrases, and ring names. Merchandise allows wrestlers and promotions to "cash in" on a wrestler's gimmick and "overcome the limitations of [a wrestler's] ephemeral and embodied performance" (Laine, 2019a, p. 94). While AEW's unabashed investment in merchandise had led to the promotion being referred disparagingly to as a "t-shirt company" that cares more about merchandizing than wrestling, in-person and online merchandise tables are increasingly integral parts of the pro wrestling economy at both the indie and major promotion level.

Within the industry, merchandise promises to extend the reach of a wrestler's persona, and generate affective encounters and affective and monetary value outside of the wrestling ring. Yet, it also demands more work. Further, while this is true, it is difficult to know the degree to which merchandise selling makes good on the promise of income. Professional wrestlers tend not

to reveal their incomes. However, some popular wrestlers, such as Colt Cabana and Matt and Nick Jackson, point to their merch income as enabling their indie careers. Speaking to Marc Maron in 2012, Cabana measures his indie success, in part, through increasing merchandise sales. He notes that he started with a small backpack full of merch for a show and then shifted to using a "giant duffle bag" to accommodate the demand. Key to capitalizing on merch, Cabana explains, is always having enough merch, and "never leaving that $20 bucks behind" (Cabana on Maron, 2012, 18:55). Just as podcasting has enabled wrestlers, Cabana included, to draw affective and monetary investment from audiences between wrestling events, merchandise and online stores provide another avenue for self-promotion and audience connection away from the ring, and another site of gimmick work. The success of Cabana, the Jacksons, and AEW stand as living examples of the economic and affective promises attached to the t-shirt gimmick and digital and in-person merchandise tables in the industry.

Yet, even though merch selling is an essential part of the business, to some degree, it is categorized as non-work. Merch selling within music and pro wrestling subcultures is treated as entry level and gendered labour and, as such, "perceived as inexpert and that anyone, regardless of technical expertise, can perform" (Vilanova & Cassidy, 2019, p. 86). As a result, wrestlers and other workers receive little to no training on how to run a table or go about selling much.

However, accounts from merch sellers and wrestlers attest to the skills, techniques, and expertise that are developed through experience. Melissa Contrino, who volunteers as a "merch girl" at indie promotions in the Montréal and Ottawa area, explains the practical steps she takes to ensure that she can process and track sales for wrestlers at the merch table. She recounts:

> It's nothing too fancy. I learned early in merch that you generally don't get change prior to sitting at the merch table. So, I learned to go to the bank on the way to any wrestling

> shows and pull out a hundred bucks in change, like fives and some twoonies and loonies. I now have an official wrestling merch fanny pack that has a notepad, pens, Sharpies in two different colours, and I'm thinking of adding some post-its so that I can start labeling the merch with prices on the table, and change (M. Contrino, personal communication, February 2, 2021).

Merch selling, as Contrino's description attests, requires organizational and computational skills, as well as a time commitment.

Likewise, wrestler narratives about developing fan rapport illustrate how the relational labour demanded from wrestlers at merch tables and out of ring interactions is not natural. Unlike pro wrestling matches where wrestlers aim to draw affective responses and emotional investment from a crowd of spectators, the merch table is about "one-to-one interaction" and "offers very different relational affordances than the stage" (Baym, 2018, p. 153). The relational labour of the merch table may intersect with in-ring or crowd work, but, as Baym (2018) explains, it "often demands skills and practices different from the job you want to be paid to do, and it can take time away from that work and from leisure" (Baym, 2018, p. 9). This includes ordering, tracking, and transporting products, and the one-on-one interactions that take place at the merch table.

In their 2020 memoir *Young Bucks: Killing the Business from Backyards to the Big Leagues* Nick Jackson (2020) draws out the importance of emotional and relational labour at the merchandise table at the same time as he illustrates how wrestlers rearticulate their characters outside of the ring at the meeting space of the merch table. Looking back to their early days on the indie circuit, Jackson recounts noticing how Montréal masked wrestler El Generico, now unmasked and known as Sami Zayn in WWE, worked his gimmick at the merchandise table

while on the indies. He describes how El Generico "struck up energetic conversations with his fans by speaking Spanish and broken English" (p. 107).[66] El Generico, according to Jackson, was "bubbly and inviting" and "every person he met left with a piece of merchandise and a wide smile" (p. 107). He contrasts El Generico's affective performance and merchandise sales with those of other present wrestlers, including himself and his brother Matt, who "were seated and looked disconnected and withdrawn" and "sold only one T-shirt" (p. 107). Although Jackson does not refer to the scene of El Generico as a site of relational or emotional labour, his use of "energetic" and "bubbly and inviting," and his description of smiles in opposition to his own being "disconnected and withdrawn" attest to the affectivity of the scene and the importance of emotional connection for selling merchandise. The merch table is a "meeting and attention-consolidation space in addition to a marketplace" (Vilanova & Cassidy, 2019, p. 88) and "interaction is key if you're gonna try to make some money" (A. Sanchez, personal communication, February 15, 2021).[67] Still, Jackson's account suggests that such practices are undervalued or taken as peripheral since he and his brother were not taught them and had to develop skills by watching others.

Wrestlers must negotiate how to perform their gimmicks while also performing the skilled, relational, and emotional labour expected of them in the service of selling online. Orange Cassidy is an outstanding example of the gimmick in action or inaction (Jansen, 2021). Prior to Cassidy's signing to AEW in 2019, the Pennsylvania-based indie wrestler Orange Cassidy

[66] El Generico, performed by Syrian-Canadian Sami Zayn, is another example of a racialized stereotype rendered in a gimmick persona.

[67] It is this aspect of the merch table that is missing from digital merch tables. On July 20, 2021, Pro Wrestling Tees launched Shoot Wrestling Video Messages, a Cameo-esque online service where customers can order a personalized video message from one of the featured wrestlers. Eight wrestling performers were available on the first day, including Colt Cabana, Britt Baker, and Danhausen. While a Shoot Video Message from Cabana and Danhausen costs fifty dollars, a shout out from the AEW Women's Champion draws $150 (Pro Wrestling Tees, 2021b). Videos are ordered, recorded, and then received by the purchaser in up to seven days and do not offer the immediacy or physical closeness of an interaction at a physical merch table.

worked his lackadaisical slacker gimmick while completing merchandise sales from his website. The Cassidy persona is "Bartleby The Scrivener but then make it wrestling"; he would "prefer not to wrestle" (Shorey [@eric_shorey], 2019). At wrestling events Cassidy saunters to the ring wearing jeans and a white V-neck t-shirt featuring an image of himself wearing another t-shirt of himself.[68] He offers a limp thumbs-up to the crowd, and then places his hands into his pockets where they remain for most of the match. He brings "inertia" as a "storytelling technology" to the wrestling ring (Duray, 2022, p. 91). To keep his gimmick always in play, Cassidy brought the same inertia to his merch work. A purchase of Cassidy's trademark "nesting doll" t-shirt saw the recipient receive an order that seemed to have taken as little energy as possible to process. Orders arrived in an orange plastic postal bag with the t-shirt and packing slip crumbled inside it. Only well after the package was received did a shipping notice from Cassidy's website appear in email inboxes.

[68] The Cassidy gimmick appears to be somewhat styled after Ryan Gosling's character in the 2011 action film *Drive* and his broader celebrity persona. The t-shirt itself is an allusion to a 2014 interaction between Gosling and Macaulay Culkin, where after Gosling was photographed wearing a shirt with an image of Culkin on it, Culkin posted a photo of himself wearing a t-shirt bearing the image of Gosling wearing the original Culkin shirt (Elle UK, 2014).

Figure 28. Orange Cassidy t-shirt and envelope received from Cassidy's webstore in summer 2019. Photo by Zachary Wolf

Yet, Cassidy's performed passivity or refusal to work in the ring and at the digital merch table is always bound up with effort. Midway through Cassidy's matches, he begins to perform athletic, acrobatic moves. As Jansen (2021) argues "the irony of the Cassidy character is that the performance of indolence he enacts requires arguably more labor than would a more traditional gimmick; it requires admirable balance to correctly perform a high-flying move set with one's hands stuffed in their pockets (it also requires not insignificantly, more trust in a competitor's ability and willingness to break one's fall)." The image of Cassidy's toned shirtless body on the t-shirt visualizes the substantial labour required to perform Cassidy's trademark moves, even if he doesn't need to be quite so ripped to do them. Further, while it, perhaps, does not require more effort to stuff the t-shirt into the shipping bag without folding it, the purchase of orange bags and the thought process required to allude to his gimmick while performing entrepreneurial

labour points to the additional work that Cassidy performs to stay in gimmick. The gimmick persona demands always-already-ongoing work and is performed through the out-of-ring labour surrounding the t-shirt.[69]

While some wrestling gimmicks, such as chairs or tables devised to break more easily, mitigate labour by cutting down on work's harmful effects, some gimmicks, including t-shirts, capitalize on and materialize the harmful effects of wrestling work, and, in fact, demand additional promotional labour to generate affective and monetary value from pain and injury. As described in this chapter's opening scene, AEW wrestler Britt Baker released a t-shirt featuring her bleeding face following a match where she was unintentionally "busted open." This was the second time that Baker's face bled during a match, and the second time that she released a t-shirt that featured her bleeding visage and promoted it on social media, shoot interview podcasts, and AEW broadcasts. In both cases, Baker uses her bleeding face as a branding opportunity to connect herself to already affectively charged images of bleeding wrestlers, sell merchandise, and to emphasize her matches and herself as affectively and economically important to audiences and AEW. In describing this second instance of in-ring bleeding on *The Sessions*, Baker recalls that as she gushed blood in the ring, referee Paul Turner declared that she was "printing money" (Paquette, 2021, 11:50). She emphasizes how she and other workers understood that the bloody performance would draw money for herself and the company. The bloody face t-shirt capitalizes on this performance and operates as a gimmick for drawing and increasing affective and monetary value from Baker's bodily labour, injury, and blood, and engages social constructions of white femininity and the heel gimmick to do so.

[69] Since signing with AEW, Orange Cassidy has consistently been one of the top merchandise sellers at the company and is featured regularly on *Dynamite* broadcasts. As of March 2, 2023, he is the AEW International Champion and generally carries around the championship belt in a backpack, rather than displaying it triumphantly to the crowd.

A bleeding face, known as the "crimson mask" in pro wrestling slang, is a "sticky" pro wrestling sign. As Jacqui Pratt (2019) explains, "the crimson mask"—the "profusely flowing mixture of blood and sweat coating the face of a competitor in a climatic performance of pain"—is "an icon of suffering" in professional wrestling (p. 134). It is "a visible marker of pain and labor worn on the face" (p. 146). When a crimson mask is drawn either intentionally or accidentally, the wrestler's real blood authenticates a wrestler's effort and willingness to suffer for the crowd and performance (Chow & Laine, 2014, p. 47). The crimson mask's iconic status and "stickiness," as Sara Ahmed (2014) suggests in her coining of "sticky signs," "depends on histories of contact that have already impressed upon the surface of the object" (p. 90). The crimson mask is a "'sticky sign' as an effect of a history of articulation" by well-known wrestlers and citational matches, which allows the sign to "accumulate value" through its iterative use and cultural remembrance (p. 92).

Baker is clearly aware that she can use her bleeding face as a gimmick to call up the image of acclaimed wrestlers who also bore the mask, the matches in which they took place, and the affective charge associated to the matches. In her match with Thunder Rosa, Baker finds the camera, and the image reflects an iconic smile of hardcore legend Mick Foley, who is acclaimed for his willingness to put his body through anything. In particular, it invokes the 1998 Hell in a Cell match in which Foley accidentally fell through a steel cage atop the ring and kept on wrestling. While this shot of Baker is not the image on the t-shirt, this moment in the match calls on the emotions of excitement, concern, astonishment, and affective investment that are already stuck to the image of Foley's crimson mask. By replicating the image and placing herself in contact with the Foley crimson mask, the emotions embedded in it transfer and stick to Baker's image and the material forms where the image of her bleeding face is printed or referenced

(Ahmed, 2014, p. 91).[70]

However, the image Baker does print on t-shirts also pulls on raced and gendered aesthetics of beauty and femininity. Although Baker and Rosa were both praised for their performances and their importance for women's wrestling, it was only Baker who commodified her bleeding face by printing it across t-shirts and promoting it and herself on social media. I suggest Baker's positionality enables her to capitalize on the momentary rupture of white femininity, making it highly visible on social media and recuperating it for professional prestige and economic gain through a social power of white femininity that Rosa, a respected Latina wrestler, does not have access to. Baker, with red blood against her whitish gray face appears almost saintly or Christ-like in the image. Her eyes turned upwards as if in a vision. At the same time, the crimson mask demonstrates that she is "willing and capable of doing the labor required of a professional wrestler" (Pratt, 2019, p. 169).[71] Thus, her t-shirt marries white femininity, capacity, and suffering to capitalist production and participation in pro wrestling (Banet-Weiser, 2018). And it mediates these dynamics through pro wrestling performance devices, including her gimmick and crimson mask, and ideal body aesthetics that are raced, gendered, classed, and sized (Hearn & Banet-Weiser, 2020).

The promotion of the gimmick t-shirt still demands additional relational and representational labour—outside of the ring— from Baker. Immediately after the match aired, Baker began promoting her t-shirt on social media. For the most part, she stays in gimmick,

[70] Elsewhere I have also described this process as citational. Baker's crimson mask is not only citational because it references the popular wrestlers previous work, but because it also attempts to draw on the cultural recognition and praise the wrestlers received and continue to receive. By working her bleeding face, Baker traces a genealogical trajectory from the celebrated wrestling figures to herself. She is of their wrestling blood.

[71] While such Catholic iconography is prominent and powerful within Mexican culture and could therefore be mobilized productively by Rosa, what I see happening here, is that Baker's use of the image capitalizes on raced and gendered conceptions of white femininity as delicate and almost sacred. White femininity's rupture becomes, in this context, worthy of attention and commemoration. Baker's past success with a bleeding face t-shirt also sets her up to capitalize on this image again.

performing again as a smug and self-declared "role model" heel. Because her character is a villain, meant to draw boos from the crowd during performances, her incessant self-promotion online operates as character work, or in pro wrestling terms, she's working an angle. In the days after the main event match, Baker retweets posts from pro wrestling media that praise the shirt's design and fans displays of their purchased t-shirts. She revels in the accolades as she points to the shirt's popularity and the fans' investment in her, pointing to the "money trail" she has produced for herself and AEW, and appealing to pro wrestling's values of making money and getting over (i.e., the money trail) (Consalvo & Paul, 2019)**.** Within three days, Pro Wrestling Tees declares the "Main Event Role Model" t-shirt the top seller (Pro Wrestling Tees [@PWTees], 2021). Baker retweets again. With each of these tweets, Baker circulates the iconic image of the bleeding face; she draws attention to her willingness to suffer for pro wrestling and to herself as a money-making draw, further embodying a pro wrestling adage that "the only things that are real in pro wrestling are the money and the miles" put on the body while working (de Garis, 2020, p. 209). The image increases in affective value with each articulation gaining capital within the industry. When she appears on *Dynamite* broadcasts in the following weeks, wearing her own t-shirt, the crowd response is intense. Her gimmick seems more popular than ever.

Getting Over: Fan Support and Affinities

Wrestlers and the other workers who produce gimmicks are not the only ones invested in getting the gimmick over and seeing a wrestler access work and income. When fans purchase wrestling t-shirts and merchandise they enact a form of "protecting the business" or "buying right" (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 133). They seek to financially support the wrestling industry and invest in individual wrestlers and other participants with whom they feel a connection. Here we

see how a wrestling intimate public comes together through the circulation of texts. Fan support has different motivations and moves in multiple directions at once. For some fans, supporting a particular wrestler is also about supporting a particular scene. Premier Championship Wrestling Ring Announcer Josh Hammerstein notes a sense of local identification when he states "if you're from Winnipeg and a pro wrestling fan, you need a Kenny Omega Bullet Club shirt" (J. Hammerstein, personal communication, February 15, 2021). Such identification is akin to how competitive sports fans purchase and deck themselves out in "logoed team goods" to show local team loyalty (Serazio, 2019). This discourse can also intersect with desires to offer direct economic support to particular wrestlers, promotions or other sites of pro wrestling culture through the buying of t-shirts. During COVID19, First Row Collectibles owner and WrestleMax promoter Curtis Howson produced and began selling a t-shirt sporting "Winnipeg - Professional Wrestling Capital of the World" to commemorate the role Winnipeg and Winnipeg wrestlers, including Omega and Jericho, have played within the industry. As Howson explains, "With the pandemic, one of the ways to keep afloat in wrestling is to sell merchandise… merchandise is a huge part of the culture, huge part of the business" (C. Howson, personal communication, February 9, 2021). When Zach and I ordered one of Howson's t-shirts online, we aimed to support the First Row Collectibles store during a particularly precarious time and also demonstrate our affinities with Winnipeg, Winnipeg wrestling, and Omega.

Fans and wrestling participants emphasize direct support as a key motive for purchasing t-shirts from indie wrestlers. Hammerstein explained that he buys t-shirts to "support friends and local guys" (J. Hammerstein, personal communication, February 15, 2021). Likewise, journalist Kristen Ashley stated that when the pandemic limited opportunities for performers, she was "prone to buy more indie stuff." She wished she could go to shows "cuz that's where a lot of it

is, and [the money] all goes to them" (K. Ashley, personal communication, February 12, 2021). Similarly, Contrino noted that she would rather buy merchandise from wrestlers at shows so that the money goes straight into their pockets (M. Contrino, personal communication, February 2, 2021). For fans, buying t-shirts from wrestlers is a direct act of care and support for the performers.

Yet, the desire to support friends and favourite wrestlers alone is not reason enough for fans to purchase a t-shirt. Rather, fans note that the merchandise must be aesthetically pleasing. Contrino explains that she buys t-shirts "mostly just to support" the wrestlers, but she also has to like the shirt. She describes how there is one particular wrestler that she loves, but she has not yet bought a shirt, because she does not like the designs and knows that she will not wear them. The t-shirt's aesthetic must also be expressive of the individual fan who wears it. In this way, there must be a sense of identification that the purchaser sees in the t-shirt.

Affinities can also develop between wrestlers and fans through the purchasing of a t-shirt. Sanchez brings knowledge from his embodied experience as a larger-than-normative person to the process of producing and selling t-shirts. For each of his t-shirt designs, he orders t-shirts from size small to 5X-large. He notes that sometimes having the largest size available turns into a sale for him as other wrestlers do not stock the largest sizes because manufacturers assign them higher printing costs. He understands the difficulty of finding clothes in large sizes and accommodates larger-than-normative fans. While Sanchez's embodiment might frame him as a gimmick and marginalize him in some instances, it also enables different forms of relationship and economic opportunities. Further, while he speaks about it from the context of making a sale, we might consider how fat fans experience being seen and welcomed at his merch table within pro wrestling and broader anti-fat cultures. It enables new affinities and affiliation.

Material iterations of the gimmick do more than advertise for a particular wrestler or offer a wrestler income. Rather, they act as conduits for recognition and affinity or community building.[72] T-shirts can act as evidence of a shared repertoire between individuals and provide openings for sociality. As Benjamin Woo (2018) explains, sharing "a common repertoire drawn from their mutual orientations to geek culture… facilitates small talk, and sometimes the shared sense of belonging and familiarity that it generates provides the basis for more significant relationships to develop" (p. 110). Pro wrestling fans sometimes speak about "moments of recognition" (p. 73) or excitement when seeing a wrestling shirt "out in the wild" on the street or at a non-wrestling event. In my interview with Val Quartz, Quartz and I laughed together about our collection of wrestling t-shirts. She described "an entire drawer of wrestling t-shirts and its overflowing" (V. Quartz, personal communication, February 18, 2021). Her comments on her wrestling t-shirts suggest that pro wrestling t-shirts can represent and engender a sense of community that goes beyond wanting to support a particular wrestler. She states:

> I'm actually wearing an Abby Jane shirt right now. And that was exciting for me because she's wearing the gear I made her and it's on a shirt and that's cute. But it was also drawn by Chango Chamango on Twitter. And so that's another person that's a part of my community that's a wrestling creative. So that's kinda where I'm at now, where it's nice to spend money within your community and it's not only supporting fellow creatives that you care about, but also, it's a thing that you connect with, and is special. And when you

[72]Stores which sell wrestling merchandise also operate as sites of sociality and connection with other wrestlers and fans. Benjamin Woo (2018) explains, "Specialty retail stores serving the geek market are not merely links in a commodity chain between producer and consumer but are themselves social spaces" (p. 135). During the writing of this dissertation Curtis Howson opened First Row Collectibles, a sports memorabilia store that he describes as a wrestling store first (C. Howson, personal communication, February 9, 2021). In March 2023 First Row Collectibles served as the filming location for wrestler Ethan Page's vlog alongside a fan meet and greet. Page's *Toy Hunt Vlog* shows the wrestler in pursuit of wrestling figures and toys that excite him and shows him in fan-like awe of old and new wrestling merch. Similarly, Howson notes that some of the items in his store began first in his collection. The lines between fan and seller and fan and wrestler blur within the social, economic, and affective space of the store.

> wear that shirt you feel warm and fuzzy a bit (V. Quartz, personal communication, February 18, 2021).

Such stranger sociailities and community care are largely absent from discussions about what the gimmick's value is in the industry, but emerge in how fans describe finding community. Woo (2018) explains, "The moment of recognition allowed by wearing one's heart on one's sleeve (or chest) [can enable]… two people to transform a purely economic transaction into a more communalized one by disguising the stranger-relationality that formal marker relations demand" (p. 73). Quartz's account emphasizes shared creativity and collaborative labour beyond an affective relationship a fan might have to a particular performer. Likewise, she draws attention to the individuals who are involved in the materialization of gimmicks.

Both Quartz and Rose speak to forms of mentorships and friendship they've experienced from other seamstresses and creators. Quartz herself describes Rose as a "wrestling auntie," particularly in the LGBTQ+ wrestling community on Twitter. In the media they are currently producing on Twitch and Patreon, they continue these forms of mentorship by sharing techniques and expertise, perhaps allowing others to join in the work of gear making. Community building and care also take shape around Rose and Quartz's media production, producing a more welcoming place in the online space in which to learn about gear making. There is evidence of a queer intimate public within pro wrestling's larger intimate public. As Carrie Rentschler (2019) notes, "craft work can create binding practices that link structures of feeling to embodied ideologies and affective affinities" (p. 133). During Kel Rose' Twitch stream one participant monitored the chat for harassing behaviour, particularly anti-trans harassment, ready to kick off any harassers. Such practice might produce more bodily ease for marginalized individuals watching and learning from the stream, increasing their capacity to participate and engage in

gear making or craft work themselves. As Jessica Lloyd Krenek (2017) describes in her research on female and nonbinary fan performances, women and queer persons are notably absent or marginalized in wrestling archives as fans (p. 4). Many, instead, turn to internet communities to help forge connections between wrestling fans that might otherwise have felt isolated (p. 229). They use social media to "refigure the image of wrestling fan culture to include their own voices and presence" and to build new archives of feeling that account for their experiences (n.p.).

Conversely, the process of getting rid of a wrestler's merchandise can signal a different process of social recognition. In the early days of pro wrestling's Speaking Out movement in summer 2020, fans took to social media to document themselves throwing out, shredding, and burning t-shirts and merchandise of wrestlers named as perpetrators of sexual violence and misconduct. The disappointment and anger expressed through the destruction and disposal of merchandise demonstrate how fan support in pro wrestling is directed towards not only on-screen gimmicks or characters, but to the living performers who embody the gimmicks. When a performer's behaviour violates the social and cultural values of fans, support is withdrawn and fans disassociate themselves from the wrestler by removing material iterations of their gimmick. This process signals a recognition of social harm. Multiple fans described fearing that another of their favourite wrestlers would be outed as a perpetrator of violence and that they felt a hesitancy to purchase more merchandise. Ashly explains, "I'm just so scared I'm gonna buy stuff and then have to throw it away and never wear it again" (K. Ashly, personal communication, February 12, 2021). In these instances, the gimmick loses its affective value.

Conclusion

Attending to the construction and performance of wrestling gimmicks as always-already-ongoing demonstrates the ways that "production, distribution, and reception are not discrete steps

in a single, linear process" (Woo, 2018, p. 150). Rather, as Woo (2018) illustrates, "All three 'moments' emerge from a field of practices, a culturally constituted ground without which they would be unintelligible… the relations between run in multiple directions, and mediating work—work that adds meaning and enables connections—happens at every point along the way" (p. 150). Such recognition complicates the evaluation of the gimmick as trying too hard and doing too little even as it elucidates how the tensions between work and non-work are embedded in gimmicks. Getting the gimmick over emerges as a collaborative process despite cultural and economic practices that frame the gimmick as solely wrestler and/or promotion owned. It broadens the scope of wrestling work and brings unrecognized and underrecognized wrestling participants, including those from marginalized positionalities, into view as labourers in the wrestling industry, and demonstrates the ways their collaborative labour is instrumental in constructing its spectacle and enabling practices of care. Such work contributes to the material and affective rigging of the industry. In thinking through the gimmick, we are enabled to reconsider and value forms of feminized labour and care work that participants engage in, which include sewing gear, working merch tables, and engaging in forms of safety work or community building, while holding carefully the particular precarities and labours that wrestlers experience. This chapter sets us up to consider further how a more expansive view of pro wrestling labour, care work, and workers might attune us to other care gaps and practices in the industry and ask us to reconsider the generic foundations—those in and out of the ring—of pro wrestling.

Chapter 4

Bumpin(g): Demonstration, Imitation, and Correction in Pro Wrestling Production

"Bumping" or "taking a bump" by falling backward onto the wrestling mat is one of the most basic and repetitive practices in pro wrestling. Wrestlers learn it through "demonstration, imitation, and correction" (Chow, 2014, p. 77). Every time a wrestler hits the canvas mat, it's a bump. Matches are full of individual bumps. Wrestlers work narratives and emotions through the physical bump; it is a foundational generic element. They perform suffering through grimaced faces in response to bumps during matches. Taking a series of "meaty" bumps can gain audience sympathy for a babyface's pain and emphasize the aggressing heel's physical power. Bumps are *what* happens in wrestling matches.

Yet, bumping is also *how* pro wrestling happens. Because of bumping's routineness, it is a real source of physical pain. In a 2021 zine article "The Many Sacrifices of Cassandro," pro wrestling critic Eric Shorey (2021) makes the case that "[s]uffering is the affective experience around which pro-wrestling is organized" (p. 6). Shorey draws links between the suffering figures in wrestling narratives, the physical pain of bumping, financial precarity, and forms of abuse and exclusion experienced by wrestlers and exposed during the Speaking Out movement (p. 6). Tracking suffering through the biography of American-Mexican luchador Cassandro El Exótico, an iconic, openly queer wrestler who began wrestling in the 1980s, Shorey reveals the ongoing struggles and joys experienced by queer, racialized, and other marginalized wrestlers working to suffer bumps in the ring, while trying to mitigate suffering outside the ring.

This chapter picks up on Shorey's work by investigating bumping not only as a performance practice, but as a social and material practice that manages conditions of fit, belonging, and wrestling production. Drawing on Ann Cvetkovich's (2003) concept of "an

archive of feeling," this chapter curates and analyzes an archive of bumpin(g) that examines "cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts but in the practices that surround their production and reception" (p. 7). I examine my interviews and wrestling media to identify three forms of bumping: bumping in the ring, bumping as production work, and bumpin' as working for social and cultural change in professional wrestling. In my investigation of bumping in these cultural texts, I consider how dynamics of demonstration, imitation, or correction shape how participants experience and construct professional wrestling. In so doing, I examine how bumping and belonging in pro wrestling are conditioned by both suffering and care.

I begin at bumping's foundations by examining how learning to bump operates as a practice of fitness. By fitness I mean feelings of physical condition, and social and cultural processes of "fit," such as membership and accommodation. In my previous chapters, I explored how wrestlers come to fit into wrestling through discursive appeals to realness and the development of gimmicks. Here I examine the dynamics of physicality and sociality. I examine how wrestlers get into "match shape" and build a tolerance for pain by bumping. My investigation explores how all wrestlers encounter pain in wrestling. I also explore how wrestlers experience physical precarity to varying degrees stemming from the lack of institutionalized care structures, and, contradictorily, I show how wrestlers rely on care from the community when injuries occur. At the same time, I outline how wrestlers engage in individualized practices of body maintenance to continue to fit into wrestling by extending their ability to bump. I illustrate how experiences of bumping are not universal, but are shaped by embodiment and positionality.

Next, I expand the term bumping to include other routine forms of individualized and collaborative work that go into making wrestling events, including booking events and providing

water and/or food backstage. I explore how backstage practices are conventionalized across indie promotions in Canada and the United States through forms of demonstration, imitation, and correction. I outline how promoters or bookers also come to belong in pro wrestling through social relationships and work, and how those promoters who do not begin as wrestlers can face social backlash regarding their fit as a promoter. My research reveals how wrestling's established conventions can alleviate suffering for some wrestlers by easing travel and creating opportunities, but can also make wrestling work more difficult by consolidating professional opportunities around only some wrestlers and maintaining backstage care gaps.

My last section shifts my investigation to examine how some indie promotions are bumpin' against production conventions by prioritizing social equity in their booking practices and expanding catering and care. Here bumping is akin to Sara Ahmed's (2017) concept of a "feminist snap," in which promoters invest resources and energy toward making conditions in which marginalized bodies are accommodated in professional wrestling. I call this type of work bumpin' to account for how such work is *happening* work. *Bumpin*' work reimagines how wrestling can happen in ways that aim to mitigate suffering, particularly suffering that stems from social marginalization and abuse. Bumpin' also describes how this work produces sensations of energy and excitement centered around queer and racialized participants. A bumpin' club is a happening club. Here bumpin' draws back to my earlier discussions of how kayfabe and suspense in pro wrestling performances aims to produce the feeling that *something is happening*.

This chapter concludes by investigating how bumpin' or *something happening* is encoded in the footage from the queer wrestling program *Paris is Bumping* (Dixon, 2020) and Sofie Vasquez's 35mm photographs of *Paris is Bumping*'s follow-up event, the Cassandro Cup, which

are featured in the *Cassandro Cup 2021* zine (*Cassandro Cup 2021: 35mm Photographs by Sophia Vasquez,* 2021). It draws on José Esteban Muñoz's (2019) work on "queerness" as "not yet here" (p. 1) to explore how queer wrestling performances reshape pro wrestling's generic betweenness, transition, and passage to imagine a liberated pro wrestling world. I analyze how *Paris is Bumping* director Billy Dixon reshapes wrestling event conventions, including commentary and naming conventions, with those of ballroom culture, and explain how Dixon sets the stage for a vogueing performance of queer and racialized opposition within pro wrestling. I demonstrate how Dixon employs a warped tape filter to create an aesthetics of excess that taps into pro wrestling's video tape culture to identify *Paris is Bumping* as foundational text to build wrestling's future. In so doing, he creates a spectacle of queer excess that responds to the histories of stereotyping, exclusion, and suffering described in previous chapters and by Shorey.

Finally, I turn to Vasquez's backstage photographs, taken the following year at the queer wrestling tournament the Cassandro Cup, to examine how she uses the feeling of film and a flare aesthetic to highlight practices of softness and care in excess of the wrestling ring. I suggest that Vasquez's ethics of photography, which center on trust and envisioning wrestling from the perspective of a queer, racialized woman, enables her to perform care and produce images that capture queer friendship and happiness in professional wrestling. This chapter brings together the themes of this dissertation—labour, affect, kayfabe, care, and precarity—to explore how "fixing" the professional wrestling industry is an always-ongoing process.

Learning to Bump, Becoming a Wrestler

Learning to bump is an early process of coming to belong as a worker in pro wrestling. A real professional wrestler must work, must bump. As noted earlier, bumping's "proper technique is taught through demonstration, imitation, and correction" (Chow, 2014, p. 77). In the processes

of imitation and correction, trainees develop the muscle memory and endurance of a pro wrestler. They are often required to run the ropes and take basic back-bumps repeatedly until the unnatural actions of always grabbing the rope (in case it breaks when bounced off) and throwing yourself backward onto the mat become instinctual and routine (Chow, 2014; R. T. Smith, 2014; Warden, 2021). Wrestlers "describe their early months of practice as painful; backs unused to the tightness of the ropes or necks that have never experienced the whiplash-effect of a bump" (Warden, 2021). The intensity of this early training is meant to weed out those who belong in pro wrestling from those who do not belong. Indie wrestler Kate Bundy put it to me succinctly: learning to bump was "the ultimate are-you-gonna-stay-or-are-you-gonna-go moment" (K. Bundy, personal communication, February 4, 2021). It was the moment where she realized "this is gonna hurt," and had to make the choice to continue to learn to wrestle (Bundy, personal communication, February 4, 2021). Bumping is, therefore, a mechanism of social exclusion that operates through suffering.

At the same time, the pain of bumping is an experience around which wrestlers construct their bodies and identities. Through the repetitive practice of bumping, wrestlers develop the ability to work through pain or injury. Like football players and dancers, they are also quick to describe themselves doing so (Rodgers, 2014; Warden, 2022a). They describe the felt experience of becoming a wrestler or getting "ring ready" as that of developing a "callus" (Jericho on Maron, 2023; Warden, 2021). Broadly speaking, a physical callus "is caused by repetitive friction" (Warden, 2021) and offers a protective layer. In professional wrestling that protective layer might be understood as a kind of affective shield. The callus "enhance[es] resistance to pain through constant exposure" as wrestlers "perform physically difficult and potentially painful

performances" (Laine, 2019a, p. 86). The callus is a guard against pain made from encounters with pain.

While a wrestling callus is not a literal callus, per se, the development of the callus is part of a physical and social process where trainees shape their bodies into wrestler bodies (Oglesby, 2022). Bundy describes, "There's a before wrestling and there's an after wrestling… I became very strong. But I also gained a lot of weight and I think a lot of that was because I was in pain six days a week… Our practice was Monday night. I would go on Monday and I would wake up on Sunday morning and be okay. And it would start over again" (Bundy, personal communication, February 4, 2021). Bundy's narrative diagnoses bumping as a transformative experience. She had to choose wrestling, choose to be a wrestler, and as a result, it altered her body and the way her body felt. Most significantly, she points to pain as the catalyst of change. Bumping and suffering defines the affective rhythm of wrestlers' bodily experiences outside the ring. They define how one's body becomes a wrestler body.

Wrestlers' bodies are shaped further by the ways that they develop their wrestler identities. In fact, their gimmick personas can shape their encounters with pain. Wrestlers establish a "move-set," a collection of wrestling moves—including their finishers—that they typically perform each match as part of their gimmick. Melissa Contrino, a trained massage therapist who has wrestlers as clients, explains that the placement of wrestlers' pain is dependent on their move-set (M. Contrino, personal communication, February 2, 2021). In particular, she outlines that sometimes a wrestler's pain can be related to their finisher. Wrestlers use their finishers sparingly at a match's climax so that when they are applied, they release the crowd into a fervour. However, over the course of a wrestler's career, they will have applied the move countless times. As such, the repetition [of finishing moves], which can create bliss in the

context of a match's narrative, also create strain, stress, and injury (Freeman, 2023, p. 108). As a wrestler solidifies their gimmick, their style of bumping creates painful problem areas as their muscles compensate for the strain put on their joints (M. Contrino, personal communication, February 1, 2021). Suffering, in this way, is both individualized and common.

What emerges in Bundy's and other wrestlers' narratives is that pain describes the everyday experiences of wrestlers. To achieve physical fitness and fit into pro wrestling, wrestlers bump until they develop callused bodies that can manage pain in the ring and in the day-to-day. When asked on the podcast *Wrestlesplania* (2018-2020) to use a scale of one to ten to describe how sore he was on an average day, then-indie-now-AEW wrestler Wheeler Yuta answered, "Right now, it's not that bad. I'm at, like, a two" (Yuta on Millman & Barbadoro, 2019b). He then quickly qualifies that "every wrestler's neck hurts… at all times" (Yuta on Millman & Barbadoro, 2019b). The overall repetitive process of bumping means that back pain, knee pain, and neck pain are common complaints from wrestlers. Similar pain is shared between them. Yuta's response also demonstrates that a level of discomfort or pain is expected when being a wrestler. His declaration that "every wrestler's neck's hurt" designates pain as not only an individual physical condition, but a social condition because it is shared between wrestlers. Pain and the development of a callus that enables a wrestler to live through pain is a point of shared identity.

While the wrestler's callus might not be a typical callus, photos that document the scars, bruises, and cuts they've received from training and wrestling visualize their callus for wrestling audiences. Such images have become generic within pro wrestling social media and illustrate how bumping is both an individual and social practice in which wrestler identity and belonging is worked out.

Figure 29. Screenshot of a tweet from Mike Bailey in which Bailey stands shirtless and shows off the marks he's received from wrestling over a long weekend (Bailey [@SpeedballBailey], 2022).

On April 3, 2022 veteran Montréal wrestler "Speedball" Mike Bailey (he/they) tweeted a mirror selfie in which multiple scrapes, cuts, and bruises can be seen across their body, illustrating the ways in which their body has been altered by wrestling. Like the wrestling callus more broadly, the marks on Bailey's skin have been "caused by, in general, a generosity of practice, collaborative work with other wrestlers… It is a metaphor for a body of work etched into the skin" (Warden, 2021). The image, posted at the end of a long weekend in which they worked nine different matches, shows the most recent accumulative effect of Bailey's wrestling. It is difficult to discern which scrape or bruise occurred during which of the nine matches. The marks, therefore, visualize their "body of work" across the weekend (Warden, 2021). Further, while Bailey's toned body is the culturally ideal wrestler body, their damaged skin and partial smile signal their fit or place of belonging in wrestling by acknowledging pain and their

resistance to it. To borrow from Ahmed (2006), in the process of bumping, wrestlers "become a [wrestler], with a [wrestler's] body, and a [wrestler's] tendencies" (p. 57). Their marred body illustrates their wrestler tendencies, their competence in managing pain. Bumping is a painful practice through which the identity as a member of the wrestler in-group is produced.

Yet, while the callus signifies the collaborative nature and care of pro wrestling labour, wrestlers' accounts of bumping also point to historic and contemporary social marginalization as a cause of suffering in the industry. Bumping, like Heather Berg (2021) finds in her analysis of porn work, "feels different than it looks" to outsiders; it is sometimes gentler or more painful than it appears (p. 50). Not only do some wrestling moves feel different than they appear, they feel different across individual wrestlers' experiences. While many wrestlers share sore necks, unique bodies respond differently to the ways they are stretched and slammed.

On *Wrestlesplania,* Kath Barbadoro and Rachel Millman tap into the tensions between the performed and the felt when they ask wrestlers: "What's a move that looks like it hurts bad, but is actually fine, and one that doesn't look like it hurts, but hurts a lot?" In her response, wrestler Faye Jackson, who describes herself as a "Plus Size Playboy," identifies a "Michinoku driver"—a sit-down body slam where her opponent appears to land on their head or neck—as a move that she does not find painful, but that viewers and even other wrestlers think looks "deadly" (Jackson on Millman & Barbadoro, 2019a). Conversely, she finds submission holds in which a wrestler holds and stretches their opponent to be painful, particularly if they are placed on too long (Jackson on Millman & Barbadoro, 2019a). Jackson's Michinoku driver is perhaps received as more "deadly" or dangerous than it is, because she is one of the few Black plus-size women working in the industry. Plus-size or fat bodies are often coded as weak or non-athletic and Black women as irrational, angry, and, therefore, dangerous. Such anti-fat and racist tropes

might frame how Jackson's Michinoku driver is understood as dangerous by viewers and fellow wrestlers. Moreover, her experience of pain during submission holds might point to how fellow wrestlers are unfamiliar with working with a body of her shape and size.

Wrestlers whose bodies do not match hyper-muscular masculine norms in pro wrestling experience bumping in ways that illustrate how entry and belonging as wrestlers has been limited. I employed Barbadoro and Millman's question in my interviews and likewise received different responses from the wrestlers I interviewed. Montréal booker and wrestler James McGee, who wrestles under the ring name Twiggy and describes himself as being "on the smaller side," calls a body slam "fairly unpleasant" (J. McGee, personal communication, March 1, 2021). He explains that wrestlers are used to working with larger bodies and do not guide his fall in the same way, leading him to land on his tailbone. Yet, because of his slightness, taking a backbreaker, in which he lands across an opponent's knee, "looks vicious," but is not vicious for him. His lightness is a benefit. In general, wrestlers' differing experiences seem to be accounted for in their individual body types. Because McGee's body does not conform to the industry's dominant body type, wrestlers are under-experienced in caring for bodies such as his. As a result, he experiences more pain during a typical body slam. Even once wrestlers have completed training and are recognized as wrestlers, bumping remains a practice of fitness that shapes how non-conventional wrestlers' bodies work and are perceived.

Bumping and Structures of Bodily Care

Overall, wrestlers and participants recognize that a bumping body is a hurting body. Bumping training practices, photos that visualize wrestlers' metaphorical calluses, and wrestlers' narratives of pain all normalize injury and contribute to a subcultural identity in ways that parallel discourse from other athletes (Malcolm et al., 2023, p. 591). Wrestlers, fans, and other

participants understand that bumps hurt and wrestlers will inevitably experience pain, cuts, bruises, and muscle injuries. During my interviews, almost every participant talked about wrestlers getting hurt. Injury is understood as "a fundamental component of both the lived experience (Mazer 1998; Smith 2008) and scripted performance (Atkinson 2002) of professional wrestling" (Malcolm et al., 2023, p. 586). This understanding that injury and pain are foundational shapes the material and social structures of how pro wrestling is produced.

To explain further, injuries are so fundamental in pro wrestling that real injuries are not always recognized as injuries and wrestlers bump through them. In my interviews, participants often made a distinction between wrestlers getting hurt and getting injured. Cuts, bruises, and muscular pain were largely understood as being hurt, but not injured.[73] Wrestlers bump through these types of injuries. These forms of hurting are understood as par for the course. Injuries were framed as more serious incursions into the body—those requiring medical attention. Most participants that I interviewed stated that they had not been present when there was a serious injury. Yet, as some of our conversations continued they remembered incidents where matches had to be stopped or where they saw or experienced something more serious than the anticipated ailments that wrestlers regularly suffer. Participants described being witness to a suspected concussion, a broken leg, a seizure, and seeing or experiencing spectacular cuts. Some of these medical conditions required that the match be stopped and were understood as out of the ordinary. Yet, because bumping routinizes pain and injury, and bumping is required to be a wrestler, these extraordinary events are sometimes initially forgotten and overlooked.

The routinization of pain and injuries that bumping establishes means that despite the expectation that wrestlers will get hurt during performances, medical care protocols and

[73] Recent studies by David Beard (2022) and Warden (2022b) describe similar findings.

materials are somewhat absent from indie events. Belonging, in these instances, does not mean accommodating for the bodily care needs of wrestlers. When I asked participants, who regularly worked at independent events, about the availability of first aid kits their responses were mixed. Most responded that the venue had a first aid kit, but they were unsure how or if the first aid kit was maintained or restocked. One participant replied, "I think there's something." It is clear that there is not a standard practice of care at most independent events in Canada and the USA. Because of the lack of industry oversight and regulation, wrestlers instead rely on "personalized diagnostic criteria" which sometimes allows them to "continue wrestling despite experiencing the signs and symptoms of concussion" or other injuries (Malcolm et al, 2023, p. 592). Just as trainees encounter an internal "are-you-gonna-stay-or-are-you-gonna-go moment" in response to the pain of learning to bump, established wrestlers treat in-match experiences of pain and injury as moments that must be wrestled through. Being a wrestler sometimes means bumping even when one should, perhaps, stop bumping.

There are, of course, exceptions where safety protocols or medical care structures are in place at indie wrestling events. In many of those cases, state or insurance regulations require particular care standards, and thus, shape how events are produced. Uncanny Attractions booker Darnell Mitchell notes: "New York doesn't play" (D. Mitchell, personal communication, March 4, 2021). The New York-based promotion must hire a state-required medic to be present at their events so that they can operate without the fear of being shut down. Similarly, Winnipeg Pro Wrestling (WPW) booker Devin Bray explains that to book his desired venues for WPW—West End Cultural Centre and the Manitoba Museum—the wrestling company needed to be insured. The insurance company requires medical personnel to be present (Bray on Jericho, 2023). While both Uncanny Attractions and WPW engage in practices of care that go beyond wrestling

subcultural expectations—as I will explain later—in these instances, broader social infrastructures also place boundaries on how bumping can play out. However, while having first responders present at events might ensure that wrestlers will be treated more quickly, it does not guarantee that a wrestler will choose to stop wrestling through injury when the cultural convention is to only stop a match when absolutely necessary.

This is not to say that workers do not care about their own or each other's health. As discussed earlier, working safely is a deep value in pro wrestling. Fans are not desensitized to pro wrestlers' injuries. As noted earlier, fans describe getting "taken out of a match" because of a wrestler's injury. Podcasters Marty DeRosa and Sarah Shockey described to me—and on their podcast—the concern that they feel during matches when it's hard to tell if a wrestler has really been injured or if it is part of the performance (M. DeRosa and S. Shockey, personal communication, February 16, 2021).[74] Injury can disrupt the flow of the narrative and shift participants affective engagements. They become disconnected from the match story, and instead focus on the well-being of the wrestlers. Conversely, injury can also be a point of affective and financial investment for wrestlers outside of the ring. Sonya Ballantyne suggests that fans' knowledge of wrestlers' pain and injuries shape how fans "start to appreciate the person behind it and get connected to their lives, because they brought you so much joy" at a physical cost (S. Ballantyne, personal communication, February 8, 2021). She notes that fans contribute to GoFundMe campaigns to pay wrestler medical bills. Fans demonstrate their investment in wrestling by caring about and for wrestlers' physical well-being.

[74] In my experience of watching televised wrestling, it is usually when the broadcast team and camera pays the least amount of attention to a performer's injury that the injury is most real and most severe. It is the absence of displays of pain that suggest that a wrestler may be really hurt. During such moments, fans sometimes turn to social media to get accounts from others watching the broadcast or those in the venue to try to confirm if an injury is real or not.

Promotions also find ways to care for wrestlers in the gaps left by the lack of formal care infrastructures. South Eastern Women's Wrestling, where Bundy wrestled, used some of the promotion's income to assist wrestlers' medical bills (K. Bundy, personal communication February 5, 2023. The promotion's identity as a feminist collective shaped their collective care practices. Participants at other indie promotions also describe community practices of care that take shape when deemed necessary. Interview participants identified workers with first aid training that act as resources for care during events, suggesting that makeshift care structures could be called upon when needed. In moments of emergency, "everyone bands together" to care for the injured wrestler (M. DeRosa & S. Shockey, personal communication, February 16, 2021). Malcolm et al (2023) find in their research into perceptions of concussions, care, and protocol in indie British wrestling that any cultural changes and health initiatives have grown out of community practice (p. 592). These accounts indicate that an ethic of care extends from the ring, even if gaps remain in caring for bumping bodies.

Bumping: Maintenance Work outside the Ring

As a social and physical process, bumping extends well outside the bounds of the wrestling ring. It shapes how wrestlers experience their bodies and their social position as wrestlers. While "the body becomes accustomed to the rigours of the ring and… the pain and bruises simply slip into the day-to-day experience of life" (Warden, 2021), repetitive bumps wear down the wrestlers' bodies and their ability to keep working. Even the simplest of wrestling moves are understood to have long-term debilitating effects. Like former NFL players, "various parts of their bodies…hurt or bear permanent injury" (Rodgers, 2014, p. 151).[75] As Eric Shorey (2021) argues, "Careers are measured by the pain each athlete endures" (p. 6). However, pain can

[75] James McGee notes that perhaps "no one should wrestle," but also "maybe no one should be playing football either" (J. McGee, personal communication, March 1, 2021).

also end careers. Wrestlers describe having a "bump count" or a "bump card" that when filled indicates that a wrestler has hit their career and body's limit. The body keeps count, recording each painful incident. In an interview with *Orange Crush: The Journal of Art and Wrestling* then-AEW wrestler Joey Janela described his fear of developing increased pain as he ages. Janela became "wrestling famous" during his time on the indies after jumping off a building into a truck bed full of florescent light tubes and fire (Fontaine, 2022, p. 300). He explains, "I'm not looking forward to when I'm 40 or 50. I don't know how my body is going to be then. But Hulk Hogan didn't do shit, and his back and his hips and everything's fucked up from doing a big boot and a leg drop" (Abdalla, 2020, p. 57). Janela's statement draws attention to how all wrestling moves take a toll on the body. The callus cannot prevent pain or stave off debility, and bumping has long term effects that determine how long a wrestler can maintain their status and identity as an active wrestler.

Because of the inevitability of pain and injury in pro wrestling and lack of standardized healthcare practices, wrestlers engage in forms of body maintenance work to extend their bump cards, manage pain, and avoid injury. Pro wrestling matches themselves are structured to enable wrestlers to keep working through exhaustion and pain. Matches include "rest holds," moves where wrestlers momentarily hold their positions together so as to catch their breath for the next series of moves. Outside the ring, wrestlers turn to wellness practices that recalibrate their bodies by treating pain, enabling them to keep working. As Sarah Sharma (2014) explains, "recalibration" is "a form of temporal regulation and disciplining of labor" that seeks to address and remedy the tensions between the need to "slow down and a slowed down body who needs to speed up" and enable ongoing productivity (p. 84). In wrestling, this slowed down body

describes a hurt body that needs to keep bumping (and hurting) in order to maintain their position as a pro wrestler and continue to be productive for the companies that employ them.

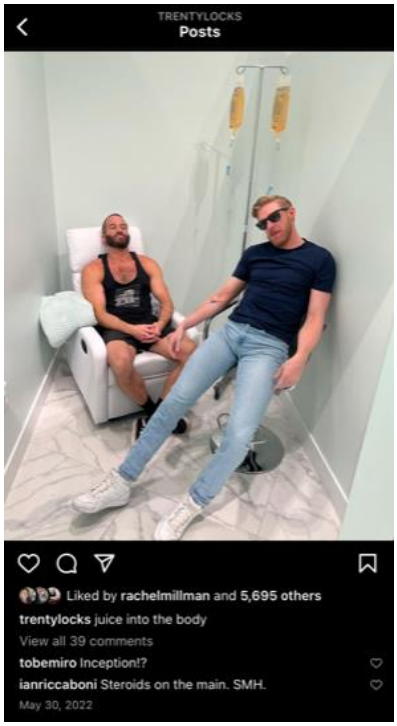

Figure 30. Screenshot of May 30, 2022 Instagram post from AEW wrestler Trent Beretta (Beretta [@trentylocks], 2022). Beretta and Cassidy sit in a clean room while receiving IVs.

Wrestlers' social media show these techniques of recovery and recalibration, including yoga, cupping, IV therapy, and other therapeutic forms. In 2022, AEW wrestler Trent Beretta (2022) posted an image of himself with co-worker Orange Cassidy as they received IV therapy. He captioned the post: "juice into the body." The intravenous bags likely contained a combination of vitamins, minerals, and electrolytes aimed to hydrate the wrestlers while contributing to recovery and future performances. While the treatment centre is not identified in Beretta's post, another wellness centre, the LifeMed Institute, which has been attended by pro wrestlers, declares that IV therapy can "restore your body to peak performance" (lifemedadmin, 2023). In Beretta's photo, Cassidy's slumped body, typical of his slacker gimmick, perfectly performs the slowed-down body outside of the ring, demonstrating the need to recalibrate it to

peak ring shape. In almost every one of Cassidy's matches there comes a time when the lackadaisical wrestler kicks into high gear, energetically performing moves. In the context of the Instagram post, LifeMed appears to provide an elixir that can reinvigorate Cassidy. The wrestlers take the elixir into their slowed down bodies to speed up and return to wrestling shape.

LifeMed's invocation of "peak performance" and Berretta's post both echo pro wrestling history and narratives around performance enhancing drugs and exemplify a continued commitment to find ways to restore depleted strength and energy. Beretta's caption "juice into the body" and Ring of Honor commentator Ian Riccaboni joke "steroids on the main" in the post comments both draw attention to how wrestlers have and continue to turn to medical or wellness interventions to enable their wrestling careers. Multiple wrestlers have admitted to using steroids in the 1990s to enhance their strength and muscular physiques (Chow, 2017; Mujanović, 2011). Likewise, many wrestlers have described turning to alcohol and prescription painkillers to cope with the pain of wrestling (Mujanović, 2011; Oglesby, 2020). While the IV treatment is not harmful in the ways that steroids, alcohol, and painkillers have been harmful to wrestlers' bodies, the wrestlers' investment in infusions that aim to support and enable peak performance imitates previous wrestlers' outside-the-ring strategies for recalibrating the body in order to keep on working and extend their bump counts.

Maintaining peak performance is of the utmost importance to wrestlers who do not have an offseason and rely on being at peak fan investment to keep their spots on television broadcasts and in narrative feuds. An injury can bump a wrestler out of their professional and narrative trajectory. McGee, who books matches for Battlewar Wrestling, which takes place monthly at Montréal's Les Foufounes Électriques, explains how physical precarity is a condition not only of wrestling matches, but of the planning of matches. He states that "wrestling functions so

differently than other things you can plan for" and as a result, "we keep things open. It's one of the only performances where performers can be like, I can't make it, I'm hurt" (J. McGee, personal communication, March 1, 2021). By maintaining peak performance condition, wrestlers seek to avoid pulling out of matches and losing economic opportunity. Generally speaking, AEW wrestlers do not receive corporate healthcare benefits and therefore rely on their own everyday healthcare practices to ensure their physical wellbeing and performance level (WrestlingNewsCo, 2019). By performing individualized bodily maintenance wrestlers conform to social conventions that require them to strive for optimal bodies even with very little support from wrestling companies. Through bodily maintenance work, wrestlers attempt to wrestle as long as possible and maintain their social status as active wrestlers and industry draws.

Bumping as Production outside the Ring: Demonstration, Imitation and Correction

Like learning to physically bump, industry practices, such as booking and providing backstage provisions, are also shaped according to social conditions of belonging and what it means to fit in professional wrestling. Learning to run a promotion typically begins with demonstration and imitation. North American promotions seem to imitate each other; indie wrestling is produced in similar ways at promotions in Winnipeg, Montréal, and the Chicago area. In many cases, already existing social relationships also determine who has access to demonstrations of backstage wrestling work and opportunities to perform and learn how to produce. Backstage industry practices are conventionalized like learning to bump, and as a result, both production strategies that mitigate pain and suffering, and those that produce care gaps are often reproduced.

There are no training schools for promoters like there are for wrestlers. Instead, learning to promote is typically gleaned from existing social relationships and from working other jobs at

wrestling promotions that enabled a backstage view. Often promoters begin as wrestlers, having witnessed and participated in the work of putting on a wrestling event. Promoters without wrestling experience tend to learn from industry insiders, including veteran wrestlers. They work alongside veterans or ask questions in regards to how to book wrestlers for shows and what is expected in regards to pay, travel arrangements, accommodations, and backstage amenities. Devin Bray in Winnipeg notes that he relies on A.J. Sanchez for advice on how to book wrestlers and shows (D. Bray, personal communication, March 8, 2021). Pat Laprade is a student of the industry, having learned backstage while working many jobs across wrestling, including bell ringer, ring announcer, historian, and broadcast commentator. He promotes Femmes Fatales, an all-women's promotion based in Montréal, and describes learning about women's wrestling, in particular, from Lufisto, an experienced Quebecoise wrestler (P. Laprade, personal communication, March 16, 2021). Non-wrestler promoters therefore find their fit in the industry through social and professional relationships.

Experienced wrestlers offer models to learn from and correct inexperienced promoters when deemed necessary. Corrections can include admonitions on what types of backstage images can be posted publicly as part of promotion or around booking decisions. These types of corrections often revolve around maintaining conventions that protect the realness of professional wrestling by hiding backstage collaboration between opposing wrestlers or conforming to established frameworks for when it is believable or not to change a champion.

However, correction around right industry behavior can also take the shape of social backlash and harassment. Prior to starting WPW, Bray was largely a fan. He recounts on *Talk is Jericho* that when he began promoting, his personal address was circulated by local industry members without his permission, leading to uninvited strangers inviting themselves into his

house to watch WrestleMania (Bray on Jericho, 2023, 13:20). He suggests that the action may have been a playful "rib," intended to make him earn his spot in the Winnipeg wrestling scene. However, it also created feelings of uneasiness and harassment for his partner. Darnell Mitchell also shifted from being a fan to appearing on wrestling podcasts and booking. He recounts, "There were people who very much so did not like me because I didn't go into the business the 'normal way'" (D. Mitchell, personal communication, March 4, 2021). Just as wrestlers are expected to take a particular path through training under experienced wrestlers, promoters are expected to learn under other promoters and wrestlers. Those who appear to have overstepped can face social consequences, including intrusions into their personal lives and verbal backlash in person or online. Experiencing backlash requires the individual to decide if they will or not continue in professional wrestling. It can bring its own should I stay or should I go moment.

Production practices are also conventionalized through cooperation across indie promotions in nearby regions and shape who comes to belong on an event card. To save costs, promoters coordinate booking the same wrestler at their individual events. Typically, indie promoters work within a budget based on an event's ticket sales or expected ticket sales. The budget must account for the venue cost, travel expenses, including airfare or gas and sometimes hotels for out-of-town wrestlers, and wrestlers' appearance fees. Laprade and Bray both explain that they work with other promoters to cut down on travel expenses (P. Laprade, personal communication, March 16, 2021; D. Bray, personal communication, March 8, 2021). Rather than paying for a wrestler's airfare to and from their show, promoters will coordinate with each other and the wrestlers so that a wrestler will go directly from one show to another the next day, and the airfare or gas costs will be shared between the promotions. Likewise, promoters sometimes

rely on wrestlers' connections in their home town to fill in additional spots on an event card.[76] They will ask their desired out-of-town wrestler for recommendations of wrestlers from the wrestler's hometown. The wrestlers can then all drive to the event together and the promoter cuts down on travel costs.

This conventionalization has two effects on wrestling fitness. First, these inter-promotion connections determine, to a degree, which wrestlers get repeatedly booked at independent events across Canada and the United States. An out-of-town wrestler brought in to draw at one venue is more likely to get another opportunity to draw at another venue. Their friends or colleagues are also more likely to be booked, thereby consolidating opportunities to get over with indie crowds in different cities. Forms of support shape who gets repeated opportunities to fit into indie wrestling. This is not to say that this consolidation of opportunity always has exclusionary effects. Laprade and Bray both prioritize bringing women wrestlers in their shows and use these connections to book women, performing a needed correction around inequities in pro wrestling booking. However, it does shape who gets the chance to be booked and who might gain enough popularity and experience to be booked at major promotions, such as AEW. Second, cutting down on travel by creating wrestling loops may also be understood as a means to alleviate wrestler suffering and extend their careers. Many wrestlers describe the toll that travel takes on their bodies. As Bailey (2023) explains: "The part of pro-wrestling that shortens careers the most isn't the Canadian Destroyers, or the dives or the bumps off a ladder. It's sleeping on an airplane

[76] Social and professional relationships also influence wrestler pay and where wrestlers choose to work. Already demonstrated good business behavior—being paid as promised and good crowds—is assumed to be repeated. As a result, personal connections and previous experience shape the rates paid to wrestlers. Most often, wrestlers set their rates and promoters agree to the amount if it is within their budget. Already popular indie wrestlers, of course, tend to have higher appearance rates. If an agreed amount cannot be reached, the wrestler will not be booked. Although most indie wrestlers do not make a living solely off of wrestling, being paid an appropriate amount, specifically what is agreed to, is highly valued. However, a wrestler may lower their fee if the promoter is trusted by friends, they had a good previous experience, or the promoter has an overall good reputation.

with your neck at [a] 30 degree angle every weekend." Collaborating bookings across social and professional relationships, in this sense, is an act of care for wrestlers' bodies.

While collaboration and imitation enable care for wrestlers' bodies through lessened travel, imitation between promotions also causes care gaps to replicate. Care in the form of backstage catering, which is typical of the film and music industry, is largely absent at independent pro wrestling events.[77] In my interviews, I asked workers about practices around providing food and water. It was always taken as a given that water would be provided. At events set in bars, pitchers of water are often brought backstage for the workers. In other venues, the promoter provides bottled water. However, some interviewees snickered at the question of food, suggesting that catering was not expected and the question was somewhat laughable.[78] Because of the rarity of backstage catering at indie shows, when food is provided it is noteworthy and "means something" to workers (M. DeRosa & S. Shockey, personal communication, February 16, 2021). Workers remember it.[79] Food is understood as going the extra mile. By caring for wrestlers' bodies in an exceptional way, a promotion can distinguish themselves from other promotions.

[77] To be "stuck in catering" is also an insult. The term catering is most often used in reference to the major promotions AEW and WWE, which provide catering for performers working televised performances, such as weekly broadcasts and pay-per-views. Wrestlers who are repeatedly not booked to wrestle on these shows—but travel to the event nonetheless—are often described disparagingly as being "stuck in catering." To be stuck in catering is to be undervalued and under used by a promotion. A wrestler gets to enjoy the free food because they are not in front of the crowd, contributing to the show and building their status as a draw.

[78] By and large, wrestlers and other performers are responsible for caring for their own bodies' nutritional needs at indie promotions. Some wrestlers often bring their own food. A.J. Sanchez describes bringing coolers full of food and protein mix as part of the process for traveling for wrestling shows (A. Sanchez, personal communication, February 15, 2021). Bringing food cuts down on travel costs and also acts as a practice of self-care by enabling the wrestlers to have fresh food, avoid fast food stops, and maintain bodily nutrition routines. At the same time, wrestlers fondly recall food stops with fellow wrestlers as some of their favourite moments of indie work. Food stops are spaces of comradery and friendship.

[79] Photographer Jason Barker notes Ottawa's C*4 provides pizza (J. Barker, personal communication, February 10, 2021). Chicago podcaster Sarah Shockey notes that local independent Black Label Pro also provides pizza and that Freelance Wrestling offers fruit snacks, juice boxes, smart water, and ice coolers backstage (M. DeRosa and S. Shockey, personal communication, February 16, 2021).

Bumpin' Work: Bumping against Industry Conventions

In a sense, promotions that go beyond expectations of care, food, pay, and booking perform a kind of bumpin' work by pushing against social and industry conventions. Bumpin' is akin to what Sara Ahmed (2017) calls the "feminist snap." For Ahmed (2017) the "feminist snap" is a sharp breaking point that occurs when feminists "can't take it anymore" (p. 190). The feminist snap is a "moment with a history" of "wearing and tearing" from working under white, heteropatriarchal structures (p. 190, 200). By refusing to "reproduce a world" that feminists "cannot bear," the snap can be the "start of something" new (p. 199, 194). While the shift can appear instantaneous, it was a long time coming.

The feminist snap resembles wrestlers' discussions of the bump card. The work of physically bumping—as described earlier this chapter—is wearing and tearing. The bump card gets filled with the pain of bumping. The wrestler hits their limit and can no longer wrestle. Bumpin' work begins when participants, including queer and racialized promoters, hit a "bump card" filled with the physical and social pain caused by social marginalization, racist and sexist stereotyping, hypermasculine discourses, hierarchical structures, minimal care, and abuse. Bumpin' work declares that pro wrestling "does not have to be like this, to have this shape or direction" (p. 196). It does not need to conform to neoliberal or patriarchal structures. I call this pro wrestling snap bumpin' work because bumpin' describes happenings—a happening space full of energy and potential. What might happen in a bumpin' club? It feels like everything is happening when somewhere is bumpin'. Like the moments of potential embedded in the suspense of a wrestling match or a pin-fall count, bumpin' work that occurs in the interval between matches creates conditions to imagine potential futures, to feel like *something is happening* in wrestling.

Bumpin' work acknowledges and responds to sexist, racist, and anti-queer hierarchies in professional wrestling booking and accommodation. In many cases, booking an individual women's match or hiring a single queer or racialized wrestler has become the standard for those promotions that aim to appear progressive or inclusive. As Sara Ahmed (2017) explains, "Diversity becomes a technique for not addressing inequalities by allowing institutions to appear [as] happy" inclusive places (p. 102). The appearance of inclusivity becomes a means to maintain the status quo and ignore "the suffering created by systemic racial or gender-based discrimination [that] is often scotomized by audiences and industry insiders who bizarrely demand an 'apolitical' aesthetic from the medium" (Shorey, 2021, p. 6). Those who call out such as issues are told to just "enjoy wrestling." Those promotions that prioritize booking queer, racialized, and women wrestlers beyond a single match recognize the injury caused by the racist, sexist, and anti-queer practices that have shaped wrestling throughout its history. They bump against industry standards by refusing to *imitate* other booking conventions.

Rather, they engage in social and economic *correction* by creating more matches and income for marginalized workers. Taylor Gregg, co-owner of Pittsburgh's Enjoy Wrestling explains, "Other organizations were kind of just, you know, 'We have a women's match,' and it checked their box and that was enough for them. But we personally [think] it doesn't have to stop at one match" (Koscinski, 2021). For Gregg, booking more matches with marginalized wrestlers is corrective and a practice of care. Enjoy Wrestling began in late 2020-early 2021 as an attempt to get money in the hands of indie wrestlers, who were out of work during the early days of the COVID19 pandemic (Koscinski, 2021). By prioritizing marginalized wrestlers, Enjoy Wrestling reconfigures how income opportunities can become consolidated around already popular wrestlers who conform to the hypermasculine pro wrestling ideal. While Enjoy

Wrestling does tend to book well-known racialized or queer indie wrestlers, the sheer number of matches enables them to book more marginalized wrestlers and create income opportunities for lesser-known wrestlers. Likewise, New York's Uncanny Attraction booker Darnell Mitchell, who is Black and queer, describes doing work to alleviate pay inequities for marginalized wrestlers. While booking Uncanny Attractions, Mitchell found that marginalized wrestlers sometimes undercut their rates. He would encourage wrestlers to ask for more money. He states, "Wrestlers don't get paid nearly as much as they deserve to… It's a long day and I think you should be paid accordingly for your long day (D. Mitchell, personal communication, March 4, 2021). In both these instances, the bookers work to create conditions where marginalized wrestlers will not feel the rawness of being excluded or undervalued.

However, creating conditions where typically marginalized wrestlers can feel minimal social pain and access economic opportunity is an ongoing process that, like creating wrestling narratives, requires promoters to think both to the past and to imagine the future. Outlining the process of booking Uncanny Attractions, Mitchell explains that as he and indie wrestler MV Young book future shows, they reflect on their previous work: "What's important is that we think about what happened in the previous show. Was there enough representation? Did we have enough women on the show? Did we make a conscious effort to reach out to more? For me, it's very important to me that every single match has a marginalized person there" (D. Mitchell, personal communication, March 4, 2021). In some ways, this process is similar to how bookers generally describe thinking through previous matches and narratives to track the current angles or stories playing out at their events. Reflection is key to wrestling booking. However, Mitchell's description highlights how his social commitments shape Uncanny Attractions' booking. While Mitchell and Young rely on personal connections and built relationships, they also examine how

reliance on such relationships can consolidate opportunities and unintentionally reinforce inequity. In response, they consider where they might need "to reach out more" to correct such social imbalances.

The promoters' narratives demonstrate the ongoing work—the ongoing bumpin'—required to accommodate marginalized wrestlers as they describe the additional steps they take when producing events. Billy Dixon, who is also Black and queer and produced *Paris is Bumping*, a 2020 taped program that brings together indie wrestling with drag culture, explains, "[H]iring [queer talent] is a small percentage of the battle. The rest of the battle is making sure that…fans know what is and what is not acceptable, that you're going to defend [queer talent] at all times, and letting your queer workers know that you have their back first and foremost" (Dixon on Shorey & Alan, 2020). Booking alone is not enough. Supporting marginalized wrestlers requires additional work so that accommodation can become a new conventionalized practice.

This work includes accommodating wrestlers' physical needs to alleviate physical strain and suffering. Enjoy Wrestling, Uncanny Attractions, and Winnipeg Pro Wrestling all prioritize wrestler accommodations (catering and places to stay) and diverse bookings at their events. On January 18, 2021 indie wrestler Mr. Grim (2021) tweeted an image of a table from backstage at Enjoy Wrestling's COVID19 taping. Prior to the taping, the new promotion had asked online what items wrestlers wished they had backstage ([@enjoywrestle], Enjoy Wrestling, 2020). Enjoy Wrestling's response to the wrestlers, shown in Mr. Grim's tweet, was a table filled with bath bombs, protein bars, energy gummies, and other items intended to replenish and care for the performers' expended energy and sore bodies while working in Enjoy Wrestling's closed-set matches.

Figures 31-32. Screenshots of Mr. Grim (2021) and Nick Shin's (2021) tweets about their experience at Enjoy Wrestling's first taping in 2021.

Enjoy Wrestling's table full of care items filled the conventionalized industry care gaps by providing for wrestlers' essential bodily maintenance needs, extending their ability to bump.

By stepping into the care gaps, Enjoy Wrestling bumps against conventions that equate food as an extra, in excess of the requirements to produce wrestling. Instead, their table of supplies demonstrates how a bump, like a snap, can be the "start of something" that challenges past industry conventions and envisions new standard infrastructures of care (Ahmed, 2017, p. 194). Tweets from two of the event's workers show how wrestlers publicly highlighted the care they received from Enjoy Wrestling. Grim (2021) accompanies his picture of the table with "in love" emojis, demonstrating how the table was received with love. Referee Nick Shin's (2021) response to Grim emphasizes how Enjoy Wrestling sets a new standard: "none of you other promotions live up to the expectations that have been set by them. They accommodated the workers in ways we didn't think we wanted to be accommodated and did it with a consistent

professional smile." Shin's use of "accommodated" draws attention to how care practices enable a feeling of fit to take place, particularly for those who have been traditionally marginalized. Moreover, by sharing these comments online, both Grim and Shin publicly suggest that providing more care items should be the new standard for what makes a good promotion. Likewise, Mitchell, who has worked at Enjoy Wrestling, makes the case for providing catering as a new standard. He states, "I think feeding wrestlers is like the least you can do" (D. Mitchell, personal communication, March 4, 2021). By treating feeding wrestlers as *the least* a promotion can do, promotions that provide catering or food set the accommodation as fundamental to pro wrestling as learning to bump.

Accommodation, as Dixon states, also requires eliminating racist, sexist, and anti-queer discourse and abuse from wrestling. Harassment and abuse can wear on marginalized wrestlers, workers, and fans who also experience it. Ballantyne and Mitchell both expressed feeling frustrated with racist and sexist stereotypes in wrestling performances and abusive or derogatory language from fans (S. Ballantyne, personal communication, February 8, 2021; D. Mitchell, personal communication, March 8, 2021). Derogatory language in performers' promos or from the crowd is sometimes shrugged off as an expression intended to draw heat within the context of the performance. However, it can be experienced like another bump in a series of painful bumps that can determine how long and how well participants can engage in professional wrestling. As Laine, Altman, and I (2022) write:

> [I]n response to a heel's sexist, racist, anti-queer, anti-trans, or anti-fat promos some of us might find that we no longer share in kayfabe's dominant narrative, mood, or affective atmosphere. The shoot or lived realities of such discourse do not allow us to engage with the speaker as a heel working for heat or boos. We are misattuned to kayfabe's

> conventional feeling rules, or rather, our commitments or attunements to different values, bodies, and experiences might mean that we no longer attune to kayfabe in the same manner (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 223) (p. 9).

The feelings of being in an intimate public can be broken by no longer having a sense of shared feeling or identity. Or, by no longer wanting to take part in what's happening, because we are also part of other publics and communities. Harassment and abuse bump some participants out of the shared experience of wrestling's happenings.

Bumpin' work demands that promoters and other workers eliminate these forms of violence so that their events can be enjoyed by marginalized participants, including wrestlers and fans. This work takes place both backstage and at performances themselves. Mitchell describes accountability practices that Uncanny Attractions has in place to enable wrestlers to work safely and avoid or report harassment or unsafe conditions. When booking wrestlers, Mitchell offers to provide wrestlers with the list of other performers on the show. He explains that he "think[s] it's important that people know who they're working with" (D. Mitchell, personal communication, March 4, 2021). He also provides wrestlers with the names and contact information for Uncanny Attractions' other producers in order to give the performers another point of contact. This practice enables accountability and also aims to correct the suffering previously ignored and then exposed by pro wrestling's Speaking Out movement (Shorey, 2021, p. 6). Not only can wrestlers refuse the booking if they want to avoid working with a particular wrestler, they also have a framework for reporting misbehavior from wrestlers or a producer to another one of Uncanny Attractions' production team members. It is a kind of backstage social maintenance work that can enable and prolong wrestling participation.

Social maintenance work as bumpin' work becomes especially clear in how it can moderate crowd behavior and work to creative excessive, exciting performances at the same time. At Winnipeg Pro Wrestling, the crowd is alerted to house rules at the beginning of the shows by a drag queen who emcees the events. The house rules aim to let "fans know what is and what is not acceptable" with the hopes of eliminating racist, sexist, and anti-queer abuse from their wrestling shows. Bray describes:

> I always looked at it as we're having house rules against basic shit, like misogyny, racists. But… obviously I swear a lot, and we are adults. And it's an R-rated show, and it's supposed to be sex positive… [It's] just that basic list of rules, it's like three rules, and it was so normal. And one of the rules was don't touch the wrestlers, which I think that would go a long way at a lot of shows (D. Bray, personal communication, March 8, 2021).

Winnipeg Pro Wrestling's house rules work to accommodate marginalized wrestlers and fans during its events. It performs a welcome to those who have not always been welcome in wrestling by enabling marginalized participants to stay engaged with kayfabe.

Figure 33. Prairie Sky emceeing a WPW event in 2022. Photograph by Dwayne Larson and provided by Winnipeg Pro Wrestling.

By having drag queens deliver the house rules, the rules become an invitation to participate in the sensations of excess that both drag and pro wrestling evoke rather than decrees that demand restriction or a poverty of expression. Bray explains that the drag queens "have that style of comedy that we were going for, like raunchy. I see a lot of parallels between drag and wrestling, that raunchy, sort of tongue-in-cheek [comedy]… We thought it was appropriate coming from them. They deliver it in a funny way to make it less authoritarian (D. Bray, personal communication, March 8, 2021).[80] WPW's engages pro wrestling's conventions of excess to prioritize the felt experiences of marginalized participants. It limits, and hopefully

[80] At WPW's COLD OUT event, "no fatphobia" was included in the house rules (Winnipeg Pro Wrestling, 2023). This is the first time I remember seeing anti-fatness addressed in pro wrestling. Typically, anti-fat rhetoric, such as calling an opponent or the crowd fat, has been an acceptable way for a heel to get heat from the crowd. In March 2023, a rumour circulated online that AEW performers had been told to stop referring to the audience as fat (Gibbons, 2023). This is perhaps the beginning of some moves to address anti-fatness alongside the anti-queer, racist, and sexist rhetoric and practices that the culture has already begun to reckon with.

eliminates, behavior that can bump marginalized participants out of attunement with the collective affective atmosphere of excitement. It seeks to enable marginalized participation in a bumpin' wrestling scene.

Bumpin' Spectacles of Excess

The intersections between backstage and frontstage bumpin' work become especially clear in Billy Dixon's *Paris is Bumping* (Dixon, 2020) and Bronx-based, Ecuadorian photographer Sofie Vasquez's backstage photos of queer wrestlers at *Paris is Bumping's* follow-up event the Cassandro Cup 2021. Dixon and Vasquez both center queer and racialized subjects and draw on vogueing, aesthetic techniques, and the felt qualities of video and film to respond to the experiences of suffering and exclusion that marginalized participants have faced in wrestling culture. If all pro wrestling is a spectacle of excess, then *Paris is Bumping* and Vasquez's photos are excessively excessive. The events and media texts they produce resist the pro wrestling status quo. Their images are filled with bodies and wrestlers typically deemed too small, too fat, too queer, too Black, too trans or too far from the hegemonic hyper masculinity that is prominent on AEW and WWE. Rather than only featuring wrestlers from a marginalized social position in one or two matches on the card, wrestlers that are typically marginalized are present across *Paris is Bumping* and Vasquez's repertoire.[81] Their intersecting sets of work visualize how bumpin' creates spectacles of queer excess that assert queer and racialized opposition to pro wrestling's marginalizing structures. Instead, they show queer performance and backstage practices of queer friendship and happiness as central to professional wrestling.

Paris is Bumping is, as Dixon declares, an "unapologetically queer" wrestling event (Dixon on Shorey & Alan, 2020). Filmed in a bar in rural Maryland and released in October

[81] *Paris is Bumping* and Vasquez's photographs also challenge hegemonic beauty norms that are featured heavily in popular commercialized drag culture, including *RuPaul's Drag Race* (Vesey, 2016).

2020 on the digital streaming platform Independent Wrestling TV (IWTV), *Paris is Bumping*, takes its name from Jennie Livingston's 1990 documentary on 1980s New York ballroom culture *Paris is Burning*. Ballroom culture is a primarily Black and Latino queer subculture, organized around pageants in which performers walk, pose, and dance in drag. Its development responds to experiences of racism in predominantly white drag pageants (Lundy, 2019). *Paris is Bumping* likewise responds to white-hetero-patriarchal supremacy in pro wrestling and engages drag and ballroom culture and videotape aesthetics to create connections between gymnastic vogue dance battles and the choreographed matches of pro wrestling. In so doing, it taps into the oppositional and resistant happenings embedded in vogue performances to create queer opposition and resistance within pro wrestling culture.

In the opening sequence, *Paris is Bumping* replaces wrestling commentary and naming conventions with those of ballroom to embed the event in ballroom culture and imagine wrestling as unapologetically queer. Instead of a ring announcer and live commentary table, there is an emcee (Larry Legend) and a judges' table. *Paris is Bumping* shifts the dominant frames of cultural judgement away from masculine-coded broadcast sports conventions and invites viewers to watch through an askew lens that captures the already queer and campy conventions of wrestling. In introducing the first match, Legend announces that "The Category is DMV Deathmatch," drawing together ballroom "categories" and pro wrestling's naming practices that combine an event's location (District of Columbia, Maryland, and Virginia) and match type to set audience expectations. Legend's declaration of "The Category is" indicates that the contest will not only be a match between the wrestlers, but a competitive drag pageant that will be judged according to the wrestlers' "realness." Realness, in this case, signals both kayfabe and ballroom "realness," which "is a form of theatrics wherein performers mimic the look and

demeanor of, for example, a business executive or Ivy League student," depending on the category's guidelines (Heller, 2020, p. 133). The category of DMV Deathmatch means that wrestlers must perform an aggressive match with weapons and display their realness as DMV wrestlers and wrestlers more broadly.

Paris is Bumping's realness subverts wrestling's gender binaries and social hierarchies by deconstructing the ideal white hypermasculine wrestler as the real professional wrestler. Immediately after his announcement of the category, Legend introduces each of the match opponents: "The Overall Star of the Show" Ashton Starr and "The Queen Incarnate" Sahara Seven. The announcement sets up an intergender match between two Black wrestlers, Starr and Seven, undoing wrestling's typical gender divisions where men and women are not allowed to wrestle each other and decentering the white masculine wrestling star.[82] It also undoes wrestling's hierarchies which typically ascribes more importance to men's matches. Broadcasts usually open and close with important men's matches. As the sequence continues, their performances call attention to the similarities between ballroom and pro wrestling. Each wrestler takes their time during their entrance, strutting and posing, seeking to demonstrate their realness as wrestlers from the DMV, ready to take on a death match.

[82] This is also significant because one of the major subcultural discourses against intergender wrestling is that it's not "real." *Paris is Bumping* refuses this framework.

Figure 34. Still showing Sahara Seven as she looks back at Ashton Starr following her entrance at *Paris is Bumping* (Dixon, 2020).

When each wrestler has entered, the judges, including Eric Shorey, Faye Jackson and gear maker Kel Rose, assign scores to wrestlers' gear and entrances underscoring wrestling's already-existing tradition of extravagant looks and runways. They emphasize how visually stunning costumes and non-violent poses are as essential to wrestling performances as the punches thrown. This focus on the shining, sparkling costumes accentuates the importance of femme aesthetics and feminized labour to the performance of mainstream wrestling, thereby undermining the coherence of the wrestler as an essentially masculine figure.

The following category, "Vogue Femme Queen: Candy Lee," further opposes racial and gender hierarchies in professional wrestling by centering a vogue performance that uses spectacle and gesture to assert queer and racialized survival in the "the face of conspiring cultural logics of white supremacy and heteronormativity" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 80). "Vogue Femme Queen: Candy Lee," features Candy Lee, an openly-trans, Samoan indie wrestler from New

Zealand, vogueing in a wrestling ring with a collection of performers referred to as the Femme Queens of Aotearoa. As a vogue performance, Lee and the Femme Queens use gesture and the gaze to "reappropriat[e] the camera's voyeuristic gaze, deliberately making a *spectacle* of themselves" (Gavaldon, 2021). At the same time, by posing within the squared circle, they turn the wrestling ring into a dance floor, "a stage for queer performativity" (Muñoz, 2019, p. 66). Their performance reappropriates pro wrestling's *spectacle of excess* by replacing its displays of hypermasculine swagger with femme poses, including a flourish of soft hand gestures to focus attention around their faces. Their melding of vogueing and wrestling creates a queer spectacle of excess that responds to intrusions of surveillance on queer, trans, and racialized bodies, and to the ways in which pro wrestling gimmicks have made derogatory spectacles out of queer and racialized individuals.

Figures 35-36. Stills from *Paris is Bumping.* Lee and the Femme Queens perform hands (left). Lee drops in the ring.

In their performance, Lee and the Femme Queens' draw on the performance ethics of voguing and professional wrestling to assert agency and care. Vogueing requires that "every beat has to be punctuated by a captivating pose," "a deliberate, contrived, excessive gesture" (Gavaldon, 2021). It imagines a camera poised to capture every pose. In the "Vogue Femme" performance, the camera captures their poses at the same time as it acts like their opponent in the

ring, its movements coordinated with Lee and the performers. They take control of the camera's monitoring logics and enlist the camera as a wrestling co-worker that must care for queer racialized bodies with soft caring touches while performing violent moves. At one point, Lee bounces off the ropes. A wrestler who bounces off the ropes is often met with a clothesline hit—a strike across their neck—from their opponent in the middle of the ring. The wrestler who runs the ropes must either sell the clothesline or duck to avoid it. Lee drops to the mat in an extravagant dip. She coordinates the work between herself and the camera and, in so doing, shows herself using queer performance to outsmart her opponent and evade the violence coming for her. The image pauses, goes black, and then returns to Lee, now standing in the ring, wearing shining gold ring gear. She walks forward and flips her hair—a femme gesture of dismissal and "racialized self-enactment," "a message of fabulousness and fantastical becoming" in the face of ongoing violence (Muñoz, 2019, p. 80).[83]

The coordination between Lee and the camera interpolates those watching into this performance and into the process of queer and racialized becoming. The viewer is in the position of Lee's fellow wrestler and, therefore, tapped with the responsibilities of care required of wrestlers. Queer and racialized viewers hailed by this construction, perhaps, enter as co-workers and co-conspirators in the oppositional performance. At the same time, all viewers are asked to enter into a process of mutual vulnerability and care. Because *Paris is Bumping* was released by IndependentWrestling.TV, Lee's oppositional self-enactment is also directed back to the dominant pro wrestling culture and its participants. It offers a call to action and care that is

[83] I find myself thinking of Gerald Vizenor's (1998) concept of Indigenous "survivance," which outwits settler-colonial violence. Vizenor describes survivance as "a native sense of presence, the motion of sovereignty and the will to resist dominance. Survivance is not just survival but also resistance, not heroic or tragic, but the tease of tradition, and my sense of survivance outwits dominance and victimry" (p. 93). More work is needed to examine expressions of Indigenous survivance in pro wrestling performances.

emphasized as the performance concludes with a black screen reading: "#TRANSLIVESMATTER #BLACKTRANSLIVESMATTER #TRANSISBEAUTIFUL." The performance's interpolation of the viewers and call to action assert that the safety of queer and racialized wrestlers is, to a degree, in their hands.

Aesthetics of Use

The importance of action also emerges in *Paris is Bumping's* overall aesthetic. Dixon applies a VHS tape filter to *Paris is Bumping* footage to give the program a warped tape aesthetic that uses nostalgia and fantasy to make his text significant to pro wrestling culture (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 243-245). The use of video tape aesthetics is significant in that it inserts *Paris is Bumping* and its messages of queer becoming into the "subculture's recorded history" (R.T. Smith, 2014, p. 45). Beginning in the 1980s, fans began acquiring large tape libraries of pro wrestling matches and broadcasts (Laine, 2019a, p. 125). Fans used pro wrestling newsletters, including *Wrestling Observer* and *Pro Wrestling Torch*, and later internet message boards to circulate recorded television footage or fan cam footage from regional and major promotions around the world (Jenkins IV, 2005; Patterson, 2020).[84] For fans, there is pleasure in re-watching and developing play-by-play knowledge of matches (Patterson, 2020). Being knowledgeable about obscure matches or match particularities also acts as a form of cultural capital (Toepfer, 2011; Wrenn, 2007). Tapes that captured iconic events, such as the Montreal Screwjob at Survivor Series 1997, are highly prized in tape trading (N. Collins, 2022). Like replays during broadcasts, re-watching videos enables fans to return to important moments, analyze the action, and try to understand what really *happened*. As such, by the time a buyer receives their tape, the tape might be warped from repeated copying and watching.

[84] Tape trading continues to coexist alongside digital streaming platforms and broadcast television (Patterson, 2020)

Figure 37. Still of tracking issues during Billy Dixon's main event match in *Paris is Bumping*.

By presenting *Paris is Bumping* like a warped tape, Dixon applies an aesthetics of use to ascribe subcultural capital to his show. During the main event match between Darius Carter and Dixon, the footage appears to have tracking issues, suggesting that this section of tape has deteriorated from being rewound and replayed by viewers over and over again. Because this worn-out tracking aesthetic appears on the first watch of *Paris is Bumping*, it imagines that the video could have come to the viewer through the tape trade and been worn down from excessive use. A description on *Paris is Bumping's* IWTV page supports this assertion. It reads: "The only remaining copy was on a badly damaged VHS tape that the team at IWTV spent weeks remastering" (Independent Wrestling TV, 2020). The statement imagines *Paris is Bumping* as already collected within an archive of wrestling video tapes. This use of fantasy and the nostalgia attached to videotapes envisions queer cultural practices, such as voguing and camp, as already recognized parts of pro wrestling culture that have been saved—if only barely—in a fan collection.[85] Drawing on Derrida, Cvetkovich (2003) reminds us that "the archive is [a] site of

[85] A single tape is not necessarily a sign of disregard in wrestling tape collecting. In 2022 footage from a 1986 match between a largely unknown wrestler, Tom Magee, and Bret Hart was recovered. The match, in which Hart carried

contests over knowledge and power" and queer archives "are composed of material practices that challenge traditional conceptions of history" (p. 268). By constructing *Paris is Bumping* as if it were a past event, Dixon asserts a long presence of queer practices in pro wrestling.

The recorded footage also legitimates *Paris is Bumping* as a wrestling event (R. T. Smith, 2014, p. 56). The circulation of event footage can enable promotions to become known nationally and internationally for featuring exciting matches or wrestlers who might become major stars in the future. For example, Pro Wrestling Guerilla (PWG), which was based in Reseda, California and began in 2003, gained an international reputation for unique match-ups through their sale of DVDs on Highspots.com, a website devoted to wrestling equipment and merchandise. Fans around the world continue to anticipate what matches will happen at PWG's annual *Battle of Los Angeles* event, even though they will have to wait until PWG releases its DVD to see the full match. *Paris is Bumping* taps into these pathways to legitimation by housing its footage alongside popular indies on the digital streaming platform IndependentWrestling.TV (IWTV). Leading up to its release, IWTV's website featured a countdown, increasing anticipation for the video's release. *Paris is Bumping* took a prominent place in the platform's digital archive and continues to be available to stream over and over again.

The warped tape aesthetic implies that *Paris is Bumping* is and has already been an instructive text for producing wrestling. It is knowledge making. Tapes and recordings have long been devices valued for their use in shaping how wrestlers wrestle and documenting recognition (R. T. Smith, 2014, p. 45). As Ahmed (2019) reminds, "Use matters as a way of making and

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the less experienced Magee through the performance, had been presumed lost after never having been aired. However, the footage showed that the match had actually aired in Arabic in 1988. Another copy was also found in an archivist's collection in 2019. The archivist had digitized Hart's videotapes and Hart had never asked for them back (Binder, 2022). These are the only two recordings that have been found. However, the match has been widely discussed across wrestling culture for decades as evidence of Hart's greatness.

shaping things" (p. 14). Wrestlers use tapes as teaching devices by analyzing acclaimed wrestlers' past performances. They watch tapes featuring those wrestlers on "whose style they seek to build their own," those they want to imitate (R. T. Smith, 2014, p. 44-45). The watching of tapes is a mediated practice—like performing on shoot interview podcasts—that wrestlers engage to develop their pedigree as real professional wrestlers. *Paris is Bumping* reshapes the patterns of citation by inserting queer wrestlers into the past and depicting them as figures from which to learn.[86] Through the aesthetics of use, *Paris is Bumping* appears as a citational text that can be used to build wrestling. It directs professional wrestling towards new futures and potentials.

The *Cassandro Cup 2021* zine, which features forty-two 35mm photographs of wrestlers in-ring and backstage taken by Bronx-based Ecuadorian documentary photographer Sofie Vasquez at *Paris is Bumping's* follow-up wrestling tournament, draws deeper attention to the ongoing bumpin' work performed by queer wrestling participants to bring wrestling into new liberated futures.[87] In Eric Shorey's featured essay, Shorey (2021) describes how the tournament picks up on the liberatory work performed by tournament namesake Cassandro as he bumped in the ring as an openly gay wrestler and attempted to dignify queer wrestlers, "prior to the current moment of consciousness raising" (p. 6). Shorey (2021) writes, "The inaugural Cassandro Cup was created by Billy Dixon not only as a showcase of rising talent, but in honor of our patron saint, whose body was brutalized in service of a better future" (p. 7). He draws a genealogical line from the physical and social suffering Cassandro faced to the celebration of queer wrestling

[86] Smith (2014) finds that wrestlers also value tapes of themselves because the footage "document[s] recognition" by capturing the cheers of fans and offers "tangible evidence of glory, externalizing the amazing move or the thrilling stunt" (p. 53). It shows them as real wrestlers who got over with a crowd.
[87] The *Cassandro Cup 2021* zine was sold on inaugural champion Edith Surreal's online merch store.

at *Paris is Bumping* and the Cassandro Cup, recognizing the Cup as "representative of an ongoing struggle towards a liberated future, when… painful offerings won't need to be made anymore" (p. 7). Like the interval of the wrestling match or the pin-fall count, the zine shows the Cassandro Cup as the *something happening* in wrestling, "a doing for and toward the future" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 1).

Vasquez's photographs make visible this *something happening* by capturing and creating gestures of queer friendship and happiness in professional wrestling. Vasquez explains that when she started taking wrestling photographs she was interested in "translating what [she] saw to what [she] wanted to see in wrestling" (S. Vasquez, personal communication, March 10, 2021). What she saw and wanted to see was "backstage goodness," inspired by the aesthetics and energy of drag, disco, and seventies and eighties rock subcultures. Her documentary style aims to capture the campy qualities of pro wrestling (S. Vasquez, personal communication, March 10, 2021). It is about documenting queer presence and imagining queer futures.

Vasquez's accounts of her work that she provided me with during an interview elucidated for me how her photography is a form of bumpin' work. The images Vasquez produces are, in some ways, shaped by the exclusions and opportunities she has experienced because of her positionality as a bisexual woman of colour. Like others who did not come up through wrestling, Vasquez faced questions regarding her credentials when she first began. She describes being met with hostility from another wrestling photographer, despite being approved by the event promoter to shoot matches.[88] She also recalls how workers at another promotion assumed she was allowed backstage because she was a wrestler's girlfriend, not a wrestling worker. She bumped against wrestling's exclusionary social structures. However, Vasquez also suggests that,

[88] Vasquez also describes being supported and mentored by established wrestling photographers, including Ryan Loco, Nick Karp, and Michael Watson.

because she is a woman, she is able to access spaces, such as women's locker rooms, not typically available to male photographers (S. Vasquez, personal communication, March 10, 2021). She is able to highlight wrestlers seen less often and capture intimate moments previously inaccessible to wrestling audiences.

The intimate quality of Vasquez's work visualizes how the practices of care and softness that enable in-ring performances can exceed the ring and shape backstage work. Her work with film gives the wrestling figures softer lines, contrasting the hard contrast and flexed bodies of major companies' promotional 8x10s. In a photo featuring wrestlers Allie Katch and Effy, Katch rests her head against Effy's hip. Effy's head is similarly tilted. The two wrestlers lean towards each other, emphasizing the soft touches between them. The image suggests permeability and reminds the viewer of the vulnerability of wrestler bodies.

Likewise, Vasquez's ethics as a photographer prioritizes trust and care. She explains that "overall, in photography, it's a trust system" (S. Vasquez, personal communication, March 10, 2021). Vasquez relies on consent to set the conditions of shooting and distributing her images. When she shoots in locker rooms she avoids taking images of wrestlers, particularly women wrestlers, when they are undressed. If a wrestler appears sexualized in an image, Vasquez will seek confirmation from the wrestler that they are okay with her posting it on social media or sharing it in another forum, such as the zine (S. Vasquez, personal communication, March 10, 2021). Overall, Vasquez's work envisions and relies on practices of care outside the ring.

Figure 38. Photo of page eight of the *Cassandro Cup 2021* zine. The page shows pictures backstage at the Cassandro Cup. Image of Vasquez with wrestlers on left side, middle picture. Photos of Allie Katch and Effy on right side.

Further, when she captures friendships backstage she also documents the queer friendships that enable her participation and the photographs to take shape. Shooting indie shows in the United States requires Vasquez to travel. As a queer, young woman of colour, Vasquez is aware that she can be vulnerable to racist, sexist, and anti-queer violence. She describes how traveling with friends makes her feel safe and comfortable, and able to do her work. In one photo, Vasquez poses while wearing a COVID mask with the Cassandro Cup wrestlers and Shorey. She frames the bottom of her face with her hands, and although we cannot see her mouth, a crinkle around her eyes suggests a smile. A camera hangs around her neck, connecting Vasquez's photography to the group of friends around her. The Cassandro Cup was shot at an

undisclosed location, so it is unclear if Vasquez needed to travel. However, the nearness of the wrestlers around her, the suggestion of a smile, and the visible camera all assemble to show friendship as a resource of happiness and work in professional wrestling.

Conclusion: Bumping and Bumpin'

Wrestling is bumping and made from bumping. It is a performance genre where pain is a given. Yet, as this chapter shows, pain is sometimes avoided through cultural and labour practices (working safely and softly) and sometimes caused by lack of care and abuse. Thinking with the fundamental practice of learning to bump opens up considerations of how forms of demonstration, imitation, and correction shape the industry overall. It supports an investigation that looks at physical ring work, backstage work, and frontstage work as interrelated processes. Like professional wrestlers learning to work in ring, promoters learn how to make wrestling happen through conventionalized practices. Using bumping as an analytic frame reveals how production strategies of the wrestling industry are not fixed in place, but instead become generic through social repetition and forms of unofficial training. In many cases, this social repetition has resulted in both lack of standardized medical care, minimal bodily accommodations for wrestlers backstage, and the abuse of and marginalization of queer, racialized, and women wrestlers. Yet, as this chapter illustrates, conventionalized production practices can cause forms of suffering in pro wrestling, and can also mitigate pain. Bumping describes the work of hitting the mat, it also describes a process of coming against pro wrestling social and cultural foundations, and working to shift those foundations.

In Vasquez's photography, she shows bumpin' work as it happens. I close this chapter with one final image in which the happiness of queer friendship appears as an energizing movement in pro wrestling. It makes wrestling bump. In a photo of Katch and Effy positioned

directly below one of the previously described images, Vasquez catches Effy in what appears to be mid-laugh. A wide smile stretches across his face, while Katch sticks out her tongue. Their gazes are somewhere else. Unlike the previous image of Katch and Effy, which has colder blue tones, this photo glows orange and yellow. The orange wash is a glitch that occurred when Vasquez scanned the images in a hurry. However, she chose to the keep it because she "liked the flare aesthetic" (S. Vasquez, personal communication, October 27, 2023). The rush of the scan gave the image an affect of excess movement and energy.

It is this glitch or error that illuminates the *something happening* in the image. A glitch, as Legacy Russell (2020) argues, has its etymological roots in the Yiddish verb "gletshn," meaning "to slide, glide, slip" (p. 28). It is "an active word, one that implies movement and change from the outset" (p. 29). The glitch in Vasquez's photo, which mimics the presence of excess light in a lens flare, infuses the image with excess energy. The closeness of Katch and Effy, who regularly work as tag team partners, attests to their friendship. Neither wrestler looks at the camera. Because neither wrestler looks to each other or the camera, their attention is distributed to whatever else is going on in the room, whatever made Effy laugh, just out of sight. The candid capture of Katch and Effy and the glow of the glitch gesture to how Muñoz (2019) describes the feeling of queerness as "the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality" (p. 1). In Vasquez's photo we encounter a liberated queer wrestling world that is always already in the making. We see the bumpin' in the bumping.

Conclusion

This is Wrestling!

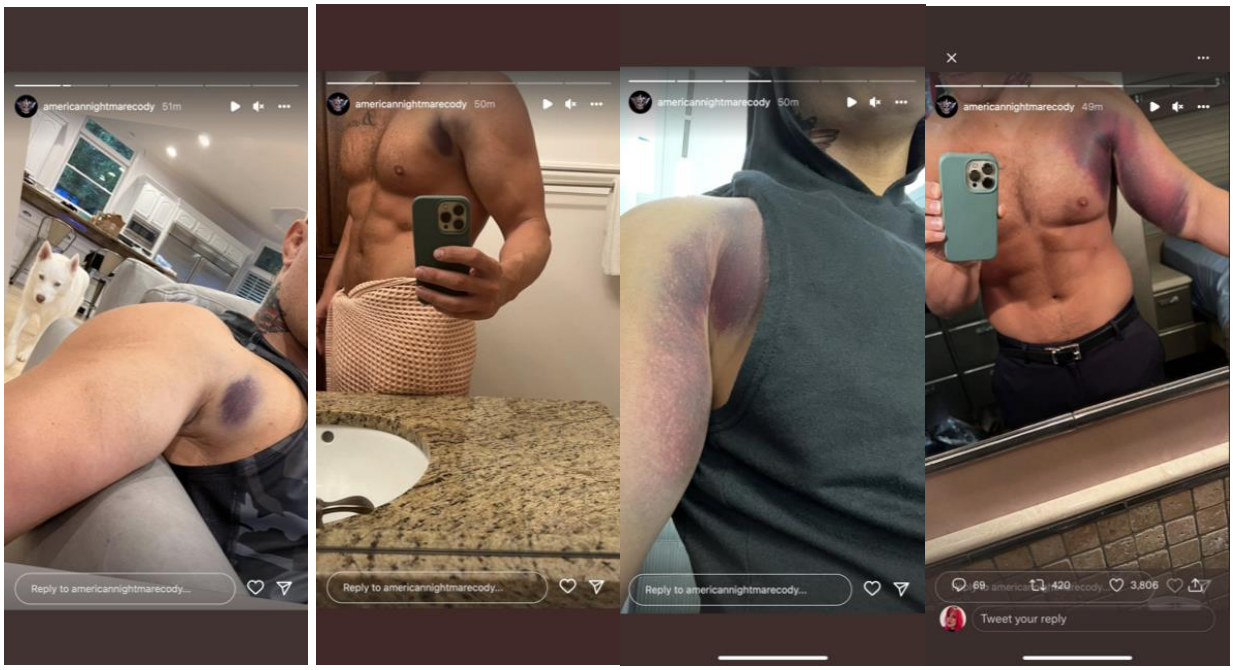

Figures 39-40. Cody Rhodes stands on the ropes during his entrance at a WWE house show in Laval, Quebec on August 20, 2023. Photos by Zachary Wolf and the author.

In August 2023, Zach and I once again cheered as Cody Rhodes made his way to the ring. Except this time, Rhodes was no longer an Executive Vice President or wrestler for All Elite Wrestling. Instead, he was making his way into a World Wrestling Entertainment ring in Laval, Quebec. In February 2022, Rhodes left AEW, the company whose groundwork he set in motion with Matt and Nick Jackson when they created All In in September 2018. For weeks, rumours swirled around pro wrestling social media as fans debated whether Rhodes' departure was a work or shoot. Some believed that Rhodes' departure announcement on his Twitter

account, in which he thanked CEO Tony Khan, fellow wrestlers, and fans, was intended to reinvigorate a buzz around Rhodes at AEW. Others suggested that there was turmoil backstage—in-fighting between The Elite—and that Rhodes was leaving because he was unhappy with the company and his position in it. In what would be his last live promo—now known as the "Exit Interview"—, the in-house crowd was divided. Chants of "Shut the Fuck Up!" and "Cody Sucks!" can be heard as Rhodes speaks to the AEW fans (All Elite Wrestling, 2022). During the promo he alludes to contract issues with CEO Tony Khan, and reminds the crowd of his role in creating AEW: "I held every grain of the revolution in my hand!" The reminder of building AEW largely wins over the crowd, and by the time the promo is done, the cheers are much louder than the boos. Yet, a few months later, it's a much louder pop when the "American Nightmare" walks out for the main event at WWE's biggest pay-per-view event WrestleMania.

Rhodes' departure from AEW and his next few months at WWE bring many of the themes in this dissertation into relief. Wrestling participants hummed and hawed in the weeks between Rhodes' disappearance from AEW and his return to WWE, trying to decide what was real and what was not. What we all knew was that there were things happening, even if we didn't know what those things were. Even when all the signs pointed to his WWE return, we waited in suspense for his music to hit and to see him walk onto the WWE stage (Chapter One). Rhodes has since given many interviews with WWE media and other wrestling media outlets, talking about his last performances at AEW and discussing the reasons he returned to his former employer (NotSam Clips, 2023). While he has been coy about his AEW departure—calling it "a personal issue"—he has been clear about his return to WWE (McMahon, 2023). He needs to win the WWE championship his late father never earned. He needs to "finish the story," and the story is one of love for his father, a love for the man who taught him to love wrestling (Chapter Two)

(WWE, 2023). The WrestleMania crowd popped at the sound of his American Nightmare music. His gimmick (his persona, entrance music, and gear style), built through collaborative work with seamstresses and media makers while he was at New Japan and AEW, was over with the WWE crowd (Chapter Three). He has been a top WWE merchandise seller since resigning with the company (Applegate, 2023). Overall, Rhodes' return to WWE was triumphant, in that he was a bigger star than when he left, and his signing appeared to be what was "best for business" for WWE (Chapters Two – Four).



Figures 41-44. Screenshots of Rhodes' injuries posted as a story on Rhodes' Instagram account on June 7, 2022 (Rhodes [@americannightmarecody], 2022).

Yet, it was also cut short by injury when Rhodes tore his pectoral muscle while training in June 2022. Rhodes wrestled injured at WWE's Hell in a Cell PPV. He then had to have reparative surgery and months of recovery treatment. Whatever narrative angles WWE had planned for Rhodes were put on hold; his injury bumped him off TV (Chapter Four). Rhodes' Instagram posts shifted from hyping his upcoming matches to promoting new merchandise and his wrestling school, offering tributes to his wife, daughter, and late father, and documenting his

recovery as he rehabbed and worked outside of the ring for the next seven months. His digital stories, like many pro wrestlers' social media, gave glimpses into the personal, bodily, and industry processes performed to make pro wrestling matches happen and feel like *something is happening*. All of Rhodes' wrestling work during this time happened in this drawn out space of recovery, away from the ring. By all the subcultural metrics, Cody Rhodes has been killing it.

This is professional wrestling.

Overall, this dissertation has argued that professional wrestling is a genre of ongoing betweenness, transition, and passage. My chapters showed that professional wrestling is far more than what goes on in the ring. Rather, it is a liminal genre that draws its affective, narrative, and economic power from the work and performances that go on across its media texts and sites of labour and sociality. I have argued that the business of American and Canadian professional wrestling includes not only television broadcasts and arena tours, but a broader collection of dispersed industry and cultural sites that all make use of its performance conventions and meaning-making processes. I have demonstrated that participants—wrestlers, promoters, media makers, gear makers, fans, and others—make use of these in-between spaces to generate and/or express affective and economic investment in pro wrestling and other participants.

I set up my argument by engaging the performance conventions of professional wrestling as an analytical framework. Professional wrestling, again, offers in its vernacular language a critical vocabulary for analyzing itself. In Chapter One, I investigated the Omega-Okada II match to set up a framework for how pro wrestling uses its narrative and production structures, and makes use of in-between time and space. I explained how pro wrestling engages in procedures of repetition and delay to draw audiences into a shared feeling of suspense and sense that *something is happening*. This chapter focused on the fundamental practice of fixing matches

to demonstrate how "kayfabe" or the feelings of realness conventionalizes pro wrestling labour and performances. At the same time, I showed how many contingencies and potentialities play out under pro wrestling's seemingly fixed conditions. I demonstrated how it is this knowledge of the potential within the fix that leads audiences to develop an ethic of tentative attention and become an intimate public.

Chapter Two focused on how out-of-the ring spaces operate as sites for wrestler and participant work, and vectors for directing participants' affective and economic investment back into pro wrestling. In it, I examined how wrestlers tell personal stories on shoot interview podcasts to brand themselves as real professional wrestlers and AEW as a legitimate promotion. It demonstrated how these stories tapped into shared feelings with wrestling fans and it illustrated how what feels real in professional wrestling is shaped by deep stories of pedigree, work, and money. Further, it showed how what feels real has professional and economic effects for wrestlers, particularly marginalized wrestlers. A wrestler must make themselves legible as a real professional wrestler to access income and opportunities, and what feels real has already been shaped by the experiences and performances of white, hypermasculine men.

Chapter Three analyzed the construction and distribution of a wrestler's gimmick persona. It sought to expand what types of workers are understood as workers in the professional wrestling industry. It demonstrated how an individual wrestler's gimmick relies on collaborative work and care, and it brought photographers, gear makers, merch makers, and merch sellers into view as pro wrestling workers. I showed how intimate publics coalesce through gimmicks. At the same time, I showed that while the gimmick promises to save labour, it requires ongoing work and performance from the wrestlers and others. This chapter also illustrated how gimmicks are sites of fan and worker investment.

Chapter Four employed the term "bumping" to argue that professional wrestling production is conventionalized through practices of demonstration, imitation, and correction that take shape on both the indie and major promotion level. It illustrated how both practices that enable care and suffering are replicated across indie promotions around North America. At the same time, it analyzed how production practices, such as booking and providing first aid or catering, are accommodation practices that determine social fit in professional wrestling. This chapter closed by demonstrating how some promotions, particularly those that prioritize queer and racialized participants, are working to reshape how pro wrestling production happens.

This dissertation makes significant contributions to the fields of professional wrestling studies, media studies, and industry studies. It is one of the first studies of the professional wrestling media industry that includes both All Elite Wrestling and indie wrestling as key sites in the media landscape. By studying the emergence of AEW and its initial branding, it offers a unique investigation into how those media texts, which have largely been considered paratexts to the wrestling programming (i.e., social media, podcasting, YouTube), are, in fact, the stuff of professional wrestling.

It is also one of the first sustained studies of the professional wrestling industry to mobilize professional wrestling vernacular as a critical vocabulary (Warden et al., 2018). Its investigation of "shooting" as part of a process that brands "realness" through talk, and its deployment of "gimmicks" (using Ngai's conception of the gimmick) to analyze the entanglements of wrestler personas with material culture are two of this dissertation's most valuable contributions to professional wrestling studies. By exploring how gimmicks operate as a differentiation strategy that relies on excessive labour, I was able to engage with the term gimmick to identify additional forms of work as professional wrestling work, including

photography, gear making, and merch selling. This investigation also expands the term worker within the professional wrestling context. By building out gimmicks and work in this way, this dissertation broadens the scope of professional wrestling studies for more research that explores the labour roles that non-wrestlers play in the industry. Moreover, this expansive view of work that emerges in my thinking with the gimmick also makes feminist interventions into pro wrestling studies by highlighting forms of feminized labour and care work previously unrecognized.

My focus on "shooting" in shoot interview podcasts also enabled me to perform an intersectional feminist analysis that reveals how social hierarchies are reproduced in the industry through talk about wrestling and wrestlers. While there has been much research about how sexist, racist, and anti-queer stereotypes in pro wrestling performances (or works) create limited opportunities for marginalized wrestlers, there has been little work on how shoot talk shapes industry conditions through appeals to realness. My analysis offers the term kayfabe realism as a related critical term to kayfabe and shooting that can elucidate how what "feels real" has already been shaped by white, hypermasculine wrestlers and informs ongoing hiring, championships, characters, and narrative decisions. By working with shooting through an intersectional feminist lens, my work demonstrates how marginalized participants must continually negotiate the conditions of kayfabe realism in the ways that they also talk about themselves and wrestling. The fact that I turned again to Rhodes, a hypermasculine figure who has garnered enormous pro wrestling attention this year, in this conclusion, shows how hard it is to get out from under the hypermasculine ideal in professional wrestling. Professional wrestling scholarship must continue to interrogate these dynamics.

However, there are many pro wrestling terms that this dissertation left unexplored that

could provide further insights into how pro wrestling's marginalizing conditions are sustained. Work on how pro wrestling's intimate public critiques the industry will continue to be vital. The term "botch" emerged in pro wrestling internet culture and describes slips and errors during pro wrestling matches. Since 2007, the series *Botchamania* has collected and circulated these wrestling bloopers on YouTube (Dozal & Morales, 2019). Mario Dozal and Gabriela Morales have analyzed *Botchamania* as a form of fan culture jamming and remixing. Yet, if we trace the etymological roots of "botch," we'll find that it once meant "to repair" or "fix." How might we think about wrestling botches that take place in fixed matches? What can the creation and enjoyment of fan videos that compile botches tell us about potentials under fixed conditions? What can these botches tell us about the efficacy or limits of fan critique?

"Fantasy booking"—the fan practice of imagining storylines for wrestlers or outcomes of ongoing wrestling angles—is another term that deserves more investigation. On their podcast, Marty DeRosa and Sarah Shockey describe the disappointment that fans can feel when pro wrestling angles do not turn out the way they imagined them or "fantasy booked" them. Such disappointment can alienate a devoted fan and DeRosa and Shockey caution fans that they can fantasy book, but they should never "fantasy believe" that an outcome will occur like they imagined it would. DeRosa and Shockey's discussion of fantasy booking/believing intersects with Laine's discussion of the cruel optimism of kayfabe. In my interviews, multiple interviewees described being disappointed by bad booking or stories at WWE or AEW. "Fantasy booking/believing" could be valuable terms to be applied to an investigation into how pro wrestling intimate publics persist when audiences feel disappointed or betrayed by how wrestlers are booked at companies. It perhaps can provide more insights into how socially progressive fans sustain an attachment to companies that continue to book white, cis, hypermasculine champions.

This dissertation's investigation into how pro wrestling happens is also a valuable contribution to media and industry studies. It performs a sustained analysis of how a set of popular culture performers work their images, bodies, and genre-specific stories in media spaces away from their key performance sites. At the same time, it examines a cultural industry across scales (from local indie promotions to multi-million-dollar, transnational companies) to explore how work, performance, and feeling practices become conventionalized across these levels. In so doing, it contributes to ongoing scholarly conversations about branding (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Baym, 2018; Hearn, 2008, 2010; Hearn & Banet-Weiser, 2020) and job precarity in creative industries (Duffy, 2018; Mayer, 2016), and joins analyses that explore how the magic moments of live performance are produced through "the most repetitive and mundane of activities" (Kielich, 2021, p. 257).

This dissertation's use of professional wrestling vernacular as a critical vocabulary within an analysis of a media industry also offers these rich terms for investigations of popular music, celebrity, and intellectual property brands. Kayfabe, shoot, work, and gimmicks are all useful and incisive terms to be deployed to analyses of how performers construct authenticity within the contexts of their home genres, and mobilize their realness to access economic opportunity.[89] As I write this conclusion in November 2023, I find myself thinking about how pop star Taylor Swift—during a break from her Eras Tour—released her re-recorded album *1989*, a tour film into movie theatres, and used NFL broadcasts for promotion by appearing at rumoured boyfriend Kansas City Chiefs' Travis Kelce's football games. While offstage, the Swift brand machine was always ongoing. Swifties sang in the theatres and exchanged friendship bracelets like they did at her stadium shows, as if Swift were really in the room. It felt real. What might kayfabe, shooting,

[89] Ben Litherland also makes the case for kayfabe as term for analyzing celebrity culture (Litherland et al., 2021).

work, and gimmicks have to tell us about how Swift produces an intimate public around her texts?[90]

I think also of how this summer saw the films *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer* paired in a box office feud in popular media that was amplified by opposing aesthetics and narratives of the films—the hyper feminine pink and blonde Barbie versus the dark brooding death of Oppenheimer. What might the terms kayfabe and gimmicks also tell us about the ways the studios marketed their films, and about how audiences performed their attachments and affiliations through the production of memes, costumes, and photographs? What might it tell us about Margaret Robbie's red-carpet appearances in outfits replicating Barbie's wardrobe? What might we learn about reports that Ryan Gosling was performing Ken-like in promotional appearances? What affective experiences did all of this *Barbie* stuff generate?

So, let's go home and get to the finish. Professional wrestling is a genre all unto itself. It is sport and drama, a live spectacle, podcasts, and t-shirts. Professional wrestling is always-already-ongoing. It demands ongoing work from wrestlers, fans, and others, and draws such work through discourses of love and family. As a result, its workers face ongoing physical, social, and economic precarities. It is, perhaps, those ongoing precarities that also continually reinvigorate investments of care from participants. Studies of professional wrestling have important insights into how cultural industries position workers and audiences to generate affective and economic investment. This dissertation, in particular, might explain what keeps me and others cheering "Cody."

[90] Podcasters Marcelle Kosman and Hannah McGregor analyze how Swift produces an intimate public (McGregor & Kosman, 2023).

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